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阿良々木暦を目がけて空から降ってきた女の子・戦場ヶ原ひたぎには、
およそ体重と呼べるようなものが、
全くと言っていいほど、なかった――!?

台湾から現れた新人イラストレーター、
"光の魔術師"ことVOFANと
新たにコンビを組み、あの西尾維新が満を持して放つ、

これぞ現代の
怪異! 怪異! 怪異!

青春に、おかしなことはつきものだ!

KODANSHA BOX

化物語 上

西尾維新 NISIOISIN

KODANSHA
ニA-01

KODANSHA BOX

化物語（上）

西尾維新

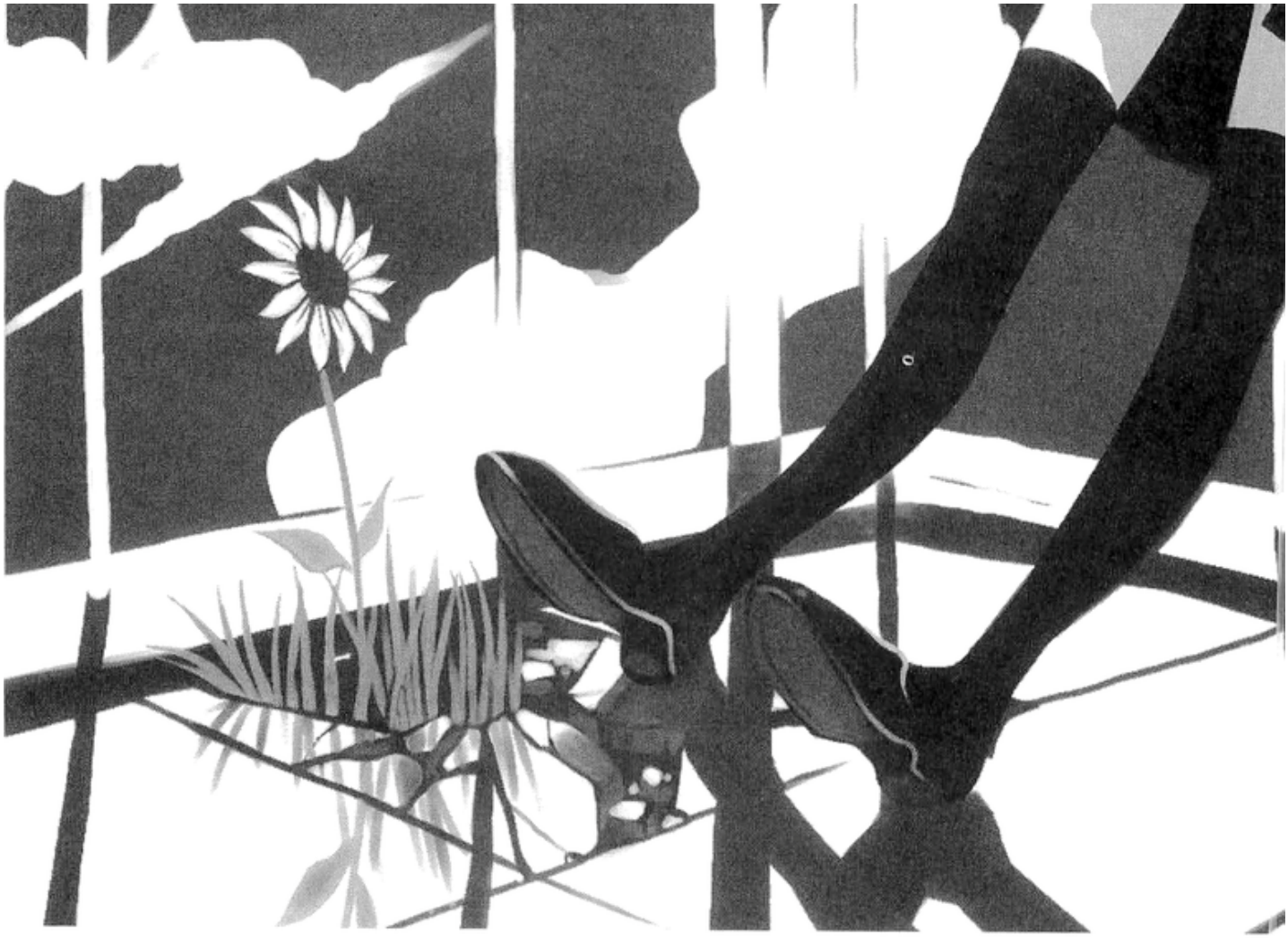
Illustration／VOFAN

化物語（バケモノガタリ）

上

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

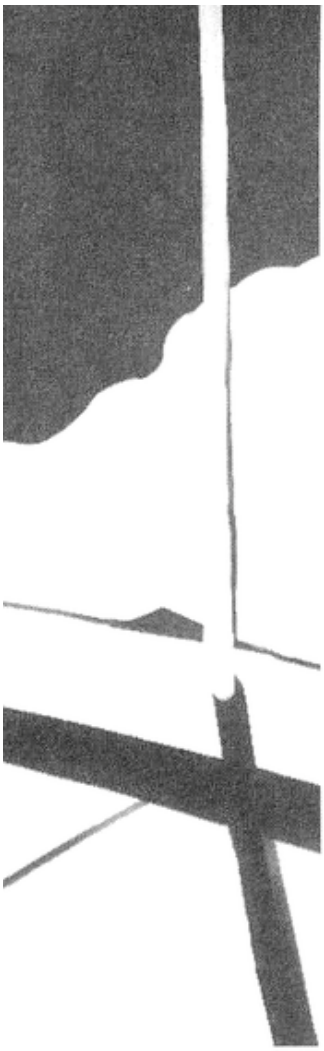
KODANSHA BOX



第一話 ひたぎクラブ

第二話 まよいマイマイ

第三話 するがモンキー



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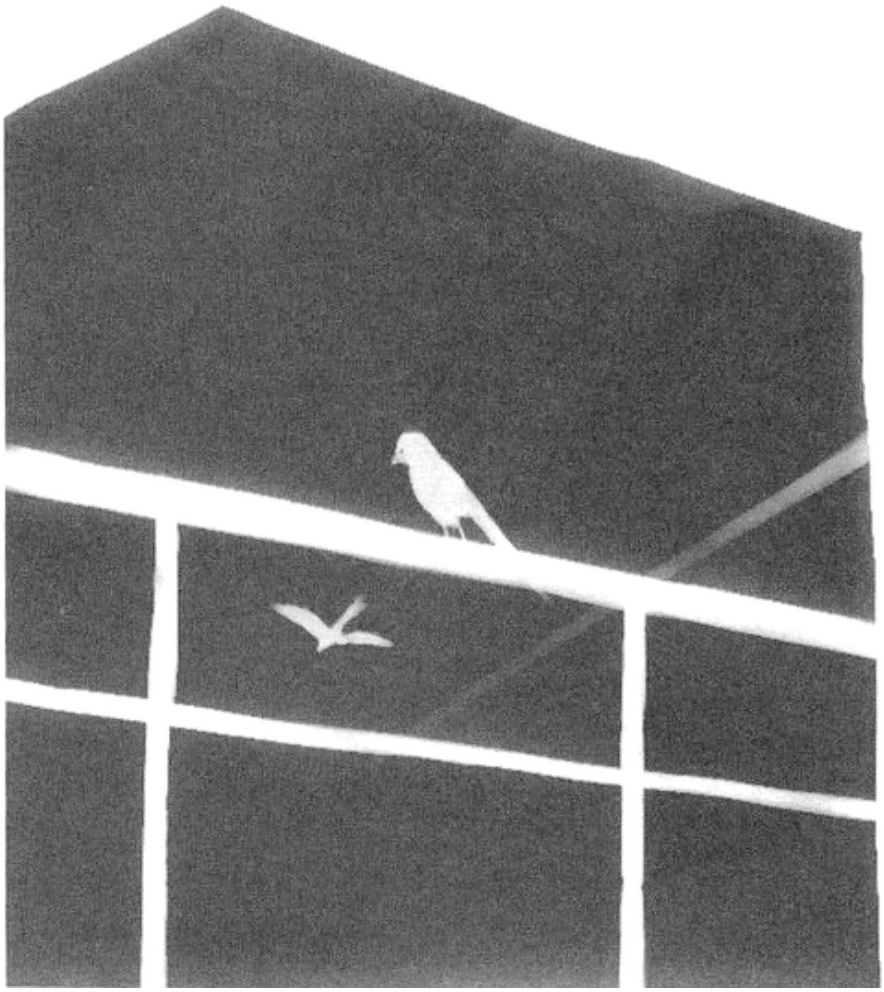

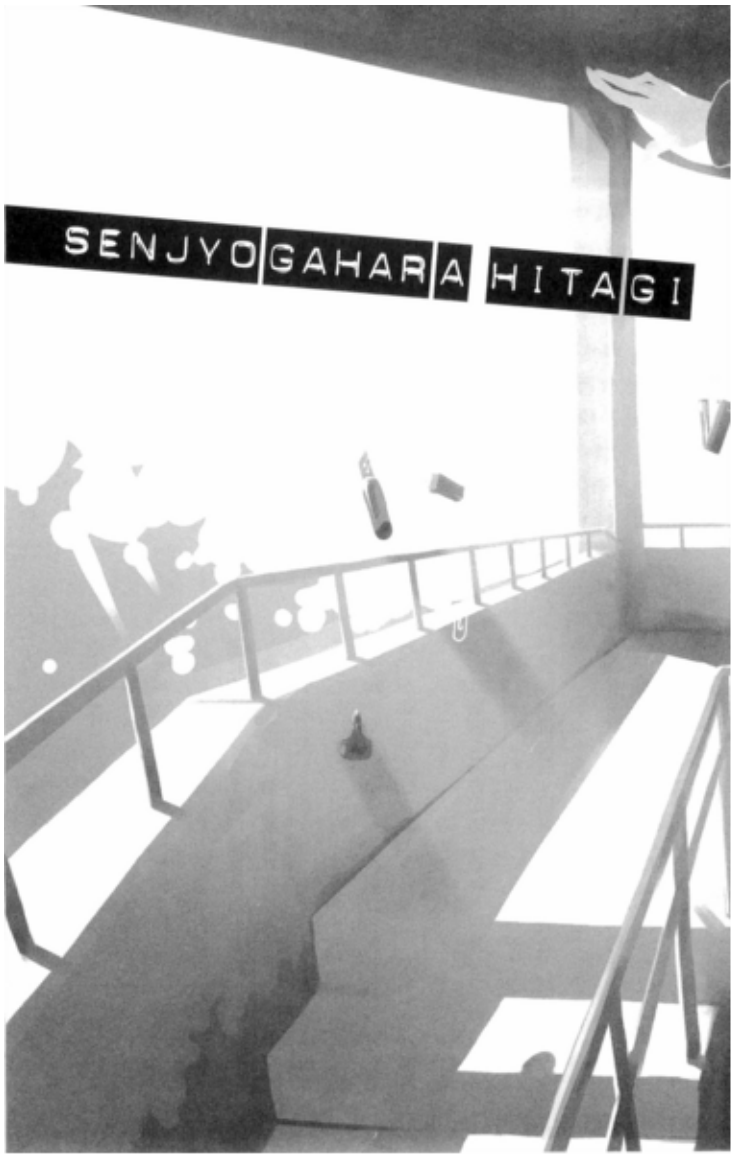
SENJYOGAHARA HITAGI

HACHIKUJI MAYOI

KANBARU SURUGA

Hitagi Crab - 001

Senjougahara Hitagi is widely known to be a sickly girl; so it is not surprising that she is exempt from physical education classes. Even for morning assemblies, she'll sit in the shade because of her anemia. Although I've been in the same classes as her for three years in high school, I have never seen her move actively. She is a frequent visitor to the nurse's office, and because of hospital checkups, she often either comes late to class, leaves early, or is absent altogether. Many of our classmates joke that the hospital I s her home.

Even though she is sick, she is far from insubstantial. As if she was as thin as a thread, she gives the impression that she will break at the slightest touch. For that reason, perhaps, the boys in our class half-joked that she might be the heiress to some big company. It seemed almost plausible. Even I think that it suits Senjougahara.

In the corner of the room, Senjougahara always reads alone. Sometimes it's a hard cover book, but sometimes it's one of those comics that will lower your IQ. She seems to be quite indiscriminate about her choice of books. It may be because she reads anything with words, though there may be quality in her reading choices.

She's intelligent and at the top level of the class.

She is always in the top ten on the ranking list announced after examinations, in every subject. Although it's presumptuous to compare her to someone like me (who fails every subject except mathematics), it must be because our brains are constructed differently.

It seems like she doesn't have friends.

Not even one.

I have never seen her conversing with anyone. From my point of view, the sight of her reading a book—the very action of her reading a book—may have created a wall around her. Because of that, though I've been seated beside her for a little more than 2 years, I can confidently say that I have never exchanged any words with her. Unfortunately. With regards to her voice, I have only heard her say "I don't know" in reply to the teacher's questions in class. (Though I wouldn't know if she really knew the answer or not, she always replies with "I don't know".) In the specialized domain of the school, it is common for people without friends to form communities with other people without friends (in other words, a colony). Actually, I was in such a community until last year. However, Senjougahara is an exception to this rule. Of course, she is not being bullied either. For better or worse, I've never seen her being a victim. I have always taken her for granted, that she would always be in that corner of the classroom, reading her book. She had created a wall around herself.

Her presence there was a given.

Her absence here was expected.

Well, it doesn't matter.

After spending three years of high school, with two hundred students per level between first years to third years, senpais, kouhais, classmates, and all the teachers making up nearly a thousand people together in the same space, I've begun to wonder how many of these people I know personally. I think anyone would find my answer depressing.

Even if a miracle occurred and you shared the same class with someone for three years, I don't think that you'd feel lonely not exchanging any words with that person. It just ends up as a memory that such a person had existed. Even though I don't know what will happen to me a year after I graduate from high school, I probably won't have a reason to remember Senjougahara's face, nor be able to do so.

That's fine with me. It should be the same for Senjougahara as well. Not only for her, but it should be the same for everyone in the school. It must be wrong to even think about such a thing as depressing.

That was what I thought.

But.

On one particular day.

To be truthful, I'd just ended a hellish excuse for a spring break, became a third year student, and saw the end of a nightmarish Golden Week. It was the 8th of May.

As previously mentioned, I had a tendency for tardiness, and was therefore rushing up the stairs of the school building. At that moment, a girl fell from the sky.

The girl was Senjougahara Hitagi.

To be truthful, she probably didn't fall from the sky. She'd probably tripped on the stairs and fell backwards. I could have dodged it, but I chose to catch her and break her fall.

It seemed like a better choice than dodging.

No, it was most probably a mistake.

Because.

Because Senjougahara, whom I caught and hence stopped her fall, was very—impossibly light. No kidding, she was mysteriously, eerily, light.

As though she wasn't even there. That's right. Senjougahara was so light, it was as if she had no weight.

Hitagi Crab - 002

"Senjougahara-san?" Hanekawa tilted her head to the side, puzzlement in her eyes. "What about Senjougahara-san?"

"You know - " I hesitated. "I'm just, curious."

"You don’t say."

"You know, like, she has a weird name, doesn't she?"

"Senjougahara is the name of a place."[1]

"Well, it's not that, I'm talking about her first name."

"If I’m not wrong, her first name is Hitagi, isn’t it? It's not really weird. If I remember correctly, it's a term related to public works.” [2]”

"You really know everything..."

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know." Although Hanekawa did not seem satisfied with my answer, she did not persist, but only commented offhandedly. "It's quite rare for Araragi-kun to take notice of other people."

I told her it was none of her business.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She's the class representative.

She is a girl with the air of a class representative, with proper glasses, rule-abiding, awfully serious and popular with teachers, one of the rare breeds that only exist in anime and manga these days.

She has been the class representative all her life, and has an air about her that suggests she will continue to be a class representative all her life, and is the representative of all representatives. There are

rumours that she might have been chosen by a god to be a class representative (just me, actually.)

We were in different classes for the first and second year of school and only ended up in the same class for third year. Even before we were in the same class, I had heard about Hanekawa's existence. It was a given; if Senjougahara was in the top of the class every year, Hanekawa was the top student. She attains full marks for all five or six subjects as if it was a walk in the park, and even now, I can remember her inhuman feat. In the term tests of the first semester of our second year, including Physical Education and Fine Arts, the only mistake she made was on a trick question in History. She was so famous, even if I didn't want to, I would have ended up hearing about her.

And.

Unfortunately, no, it might be a good thing, but it doesn't discount the fact that it's irritating. Hanekawa is a kind human being, good at taking care of people. And it is honestly unfortunate that she is a determined person as well. She is such a serious person that she doesn't budge once she has made up her mind. During the spring break, just because of a little incident that should have been over by now, even though she didn't know whether we would end up in the same class or not, she had declared: "I will definitely change you for the better."

For someone like me who was neither a delinquent nor a problem child, more of an ornament in class than anything, her declaration came as a shock. No matter how hard I tried to dissuade her, she forced me to become the assistant class representative.

That was why today, the 8th of May, the both of us stayed back after school to plan the Cultural Festival that was to be held in the middle of June.

"Though it's the Cultural Festival, we're third year students. We can't afford to do anything big, because we'll be having examinations soon." said Hanekawa.

As expected of the representative of all class representatives, she places more importance on examinations than cultural festivals.

"Instead of wasting time on gathering opinions with surveys, how about we think of some ideas and let the class take a vote on them?"

"It sounds good to me. Democratic."

"As usual, you make it sound so negative. As if you are already defeated."

“I’m not defeated. Don’t target my weak points.”

"Anyway, just for reference, Araragi-kun, what did you do for the Cultural Festival for the past two years?"

"A Haunted House and a Cafe."

"I see… the normal. Too normal. One could even say mundane."

"I guess."

"Mundane might be good."

"Don't say that."

"Ahaha."

"Most of the stalls will be mundane, but is it such a bad idea? Not only do we have to entertain the guests, we have to keep things

interesting for ourselves.... That reminds me, Senjougahara - she doesn't participate in Cultural Festivals, does she?"

Not last year - and not the year before that either.

It's not only for Cultural Festivals. Senjougahara probably does not participate in anything outside normal class time. Sport festivals were a given, but she does not participate in class outings or camps. The excuse being that the doctor has forbidden any form of physical exertion, or something of the sort. Now that I think of it, it's weird. Physical exercise is understandable, but to exclude any forms of physical activity -

But, what if -

What if I had been mistaken.

What if Senjougahara had no weight.

Other than normal classes, indeed, in situations where she'll be surrounded by large numbers of people, such as physical education classes, there will be an increase in the chance of being touched, and she most definitely cannot be able to participate.

"Are you very concerned about Senjougahara?"

"Not really."

"Guys prefer weak and sickly girls after all. That's so perverted." Hanekawa teased.

It was a comparably preferable moment.

"Sickly, huh..."

I suppose you could call her sickly.

But does that count as an illness?

Is it all right to pass that off as an illness?

It's easy to understand why the body would become lighter during illness, but that was way beyond the level of illness.

From the topmost staircase, almost as if she was dancing, a slim girl fell. It was a situation where the person who attempted to catch her would most definitely be injured.

Despite that, there was no impact.

"Shouldn't you know more about Senjougahara than me? After all, you've been in the same class as Senjougahara for three years running."

"You could say that - but girls would know more about other girls."

"I wonder..."

A cynical laugh.

"If a girl has problems, she wouldn't talk to guys about it, wouldn't you agree?

"That's true."

Of course it's true.

"That's why… just think of it as a question from the assistant class rep to the class rep. What kind of a person is Senjougahara?"

“Well.”

Hanekawa, who had not stopped writing even as she spoke to me (she wrote and erased and rewrote “Haunted House” and “Café” as the first items on the list of “Item to be presented during Cultural Festival”), stopped and folded her arms.

“Senjougahara, well, her family name seems rather dangerous at first glance, but she’s an honor student with no problems. She’s clever and doesn’t avoid cleaning duties.”

“I’ll bet. I already knew that. I’m asking about things I don’t know.”

“But I’ve only been in the same class with her for a month. It’s a given that there are many things that I don’t know. There was Golden Week, too.”

“Oh right, Golden Week.”

“Was there something about Golden Week?”

“Nothing. Please continue.”

“Ah… That’s right. Senjougahara isn’t someone of many words, and she doesn’t seem to have any friends either. Even though I’ve tried to approach her, she gives the feeling of having built a wall about her…”

“…”

As expected, she sees through everyone.

Of course, I had expected that answer to my question.

“That – is really difficult,” said Hanekawa.

With an ominous right.

“It might be because of her illness, I suppose. During middle school, she was more energetic, and bright.”

“When you say middle school – Hanekawa, you were in the same middle school as Senjougahara?”

“Eh? Didn’t you ask me because of that?” She looked surprised. “We are from the same middle school, Kiyokaze Public Middle School.

Even though we weren't in the same class, Senjougahara was famous."

More than you, you mean, was what I wanted to say, but didn't. Hanekawa hated being treated like someone famous. Though I think that she isn't self-conscious enough, she seems to think of herself as "a normal girl whose only redeeming feature is her diligence". In her opinion, studying is something that anyone can do.

"She was really pretty, and good at sports."

"Good at sports…"

"She was the star of track-and-field. She also broke several records, I think."

"Track-and-field…"

That means.

She wasn't like that in middle school.

Energetic and bright – that means, to be direct, it's entirely unimaginable when you look at Senjougahara to be direct; it's entirely unimaginable when you look at Senjougahara right now.

"That's why, I heard so much about her."

"Heard?"

"That she was a really considerate girl. That she doesn't discriminate and treats everyone equally well, and that she came from a good family. Her father was one of the top people in a foreign capital company, she lives in a mansion, and although she's really rich, she's not snobbish at all. She's above us, and aiming even higher."

"She sounds like a superwoman."

“Well, it’s probably half-true.”

Rumors are rumors.

“Of course, that’s what they were saying at that time.”

“At that time.”

“After we entered high school, I heard that she became ill. Despite that, I was shocked when we ended up in the same class this year and I saw her. After all, she wasn’t the type to stick in a corner of the classroom.”

It was what she had assumed selfishly, said Hanekawa.

It was definitely a selfish assumption.

People change.

From middle school to high school, it’s a given that people will change. I changed, and Hanekawa must also have changed. That’s why it’s understandable that Senjougahara had changed. She must have had her own problems, and maybe she really became ill. That might be the reason why she had lost her cheerful self. She must have lost her energy. Anyone would be depressed when they’re sick. Especially if they had been lively in the past. That’s why, my conjecture must be correct.

If that had not happened this morning.

That’s what I can say.

“But – I probably shouldn’t say this about Senjougahara.”

“What?”

“Compared to the past, she’s a lot prettier now.”

“….”

“Her existence is – really fragile.”

Silence – She had hit the bull’s-eye.

That.

A fragile existence.

She had no – presence.

As if she was a spirit?

Senjougahara Hitagi.

A sickly girl.

A girl with no – weight.

An urban legend.

The subject of gossip.

The stuff of rumors.

Half-true, was it.

“Ah, I just remembered something.”

“Eh?”

“Oshino called me.”

“Oshino-san? What for?”

“Something – Well, he probably wanted me to help with his work.”

“I see.” Hanekawa’s expression was unreadable.

The sudden change in topic – more like, the conspicuous attempt to round up the issue, she seems distrustful. Saying that I had to “help with his work” was on a spur of the moment. That’s why I don’t get along well with smart people.

She can probably tell what I'm thinking.

I stood up, forcibly trying to keep my tone light.

"So, I gotta leave like, now. I'll leave the rest to you, Hanekawa?"

"If you agree to compensate for today, then it's all right. There isn't much left, so I'll let you off for today. You shouldn't keep Oshino-san waiting."

Hanekawa had said that for my sake.

Seems like using Oshino's name was a good choice. Oshino was a benefactor to both of us, and we didn't want to appear ungrateful. Well, of course, I had taken that into account, and it wasn't exactly a lie.

"Then, for the cultural festival item, is it all right if I make the decision? Though we'll get the approval from the rest afterwards."

"Yeah. I'll leave the rest to you."

"Give my best to Oshino-san."

"I will."

And I stepped out of the classroom.

Translator's Notes

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1. 个 It was a mythical battlefield between the gods of Mt. Nantai and those of Mt. Akagi
2. 个 "Public works" is written 土木 (soil + tree)
   The name "Hitagi" in kanji can only be written as 肥田木 (fertilizer + field + tree)
   By the way, the name of Bakemonogatari's character is written in hiragana, therefore it has no meaning associated

Hitagi Crab - 003

I stepped out of the classroom, shutting the door with one hand, and had taken a single step, when, from behind me,

“What were you talking to Hanekawa-san about?”

A voice asked.

I turned around.

As I turned, I was still unable to ascertain the identity of the person behind me – it was an unfamiliar voice. Though I had heard it before... That’s right, during class, it was that feeble voice that always answered “I don’t know” –

“Don’t move.”

From those two words alone, I realized that it was Senjougahara.

In the instant that I faced her squarely, I also realized that she had inserted a cutter-knife into my mouth, as if she had aimed for it, as if she had cut through space and time.

The blade of the cutter-knife was.

Touching the inside of my left cheek.

“!”

“Ah, let me correct myself. ‘You may move if you want to, but it’s dangerous’ would be more accurate in this situation.”

Though she had given me no allowance to move, it wasn’t yet violence, but on the verge of it – the blade was touching the inside of my cheek.

I stood, like a fool, mouth wide open, quivering, but frozen in place.

I'm afraid, I thought.

Not of the cutter-knife.

But of Senjougahara, who, whilst threatening me with a cutter-knife, stared at me coldly, unmoving. Had she –

Had I ever seen her wear such an insecure expression?

I'm confident now.

From Senjougahara's eyes, I'm confident that, though she didn't cut me, the side of the cutter-knife touching the inside of my left cheek was not the back of the blade.

"Your curiosity is like that of a cockroach – digging into people's secrets persistently. It's unbearingly irritating. You've touched my nerves, you boring excuse for a bug."

"H-hey..."

"What's wrong? Is your right cheek feeling lonely? You could have told me so in the first place."

Senjougahara raised her left hand.

That swiftness of movement, as if she was going to slap me. I braced myself, but it didn't come. No, that wasn't it.

She was holding a stapler in her left hand.

Before I could ascertain the identity of the object, she had already slipped it into my mouth. Of course, she didn't put the entire stapler into my mouth, but held it in a way that suggested that she was going to staple my right cheek – as if she was going to bind something, she put it into my mouth.

And, loosely, she pressed down.

As if she was going to staple something.

“…ah”

The bigger and heavier end of the staple, that is, the pointed ends of the staples, the fully loaded side, was inserted into my mouth, and of course, resulted in my inability to produce speech. With only the cutter-knife, I hadn’t been able to move, but I had been able to speak – but now I didn't even dare to try speaking. I didn’t have to think about it.

First she had me open my mouth with the thin cutter-knife, and followed up with the stapler – the level of premeditation in her plan was frightening.

Damn, the last time I had things stuck into my mouth was when I was undergoing treatment for a tooth infection. So that I never had to repeat that experience, I brushed my teeth every day, I chewed gum to remove parasites- But now, I was faced with a situation just as bad... but this time, I didn't have any gum that might somehow get rid of a stapler. Or a knife.

What a way to trip someone up.

In an instant, I was completely trapped.

In the corridors of a private high school, I was in a situation so absurd, it was unimaginable that on the other side of the wall, Hanekawa was deciding the class activity for the Cultural Festival.

Hanekawa...

What do you mean, “her family name seems rather dangerous”?

She is extremely dangerous.

It's unexpected that Hanekawa misjudged her.

"After you ask Hanekawa-san about my life in middle school, do you intend to ask my form teacher Hoshina-sensei? Or do you intend to skip the form teacher and go straight to the school doctor Harukami-sensei?"

"..." I couldn't speak.

I didn't know what Senjougahara thought of the me who couldn't speak, but she sighed deeply.

"What a careless mistake. Even though I had been paying attention because I was 'climbing the stairs', that happened. It's one of those little farts they preach about."

"..."

I might be a good guy for not commenting about her talk about farts, which most girls would have been rightly embarrassed about.

"I never thought there would be a banana peel on the stairs."

"..."

My life is in the hands of a girl who slipped on a banana peel. More importantly, why was there *a banana peel* on the stairs in a school?

"You realize it, don't you?" asked Senjougahara, with that insecure look in her eyes.

She must be the daughter of some rich family.

"That's right. I have no weight."

Weightless.

“Well, even though I said that, it’s impossible for me to have no weight. From my height and body structure, my expected weight should be in the range of the forties.”

She’s probably fifty kilograms.

My left cheek was forcefully stretched outwards and pressure put on my right cheek.

“...!”

“I won’t forgive any weird imaginations of yours. You must have imagined me nude, didn’t you?”

She was entirely off the mark, but the result was just as sharp.

“I must be in the later range of the forties,” she asserted. She stood her ground.

“But my weight at this moment is five kilograms.”

Five kilograms.

It wasn’t very different from a newborn baby.

An image of a five kilogram dumbbell came to mind, and it wasn’t anywhere close to zero. But for five kilograms to be spread out in the volume of a human being, the density – to her, it must feel as if she has no weight.

It would be easy to catch her as she fell.

“Well, even though the scales say that I’m five kilograms, I don’t feel it. I don’t feel any different from when I was in the later range of the forties.”

Does that –

Does that mean that gravity doesn't work on her? Not weight, but volume – since humans are made up of mostly water, specific gravity, assuming density is one whole – put simply, Senjougahara is only one-tenth of that density.

If the density of the bones is one-tenth of the actual weight, she'd suffer from osteoporosis before long. Her organs and brains would not be able to work properly.

That's why, it's completely impossible.

It's not about the numbers.

If she was as light as this, she would be dead.

"I know what you're thinking about."

"..."

"To keep staring at my breasts, you're disgusting."

"...!"

I swear I wasn't staring!

Seems like Senjougahara is a rather self-conscious girl. It's not unexpected, given her looks and beauty – I just wish that Senjougahara had even a thousandth of Hanekawa's virtues.

"That's why I hate shallow people."

It doesn't seem possible to clear the misunderstanding between us – but more important, I was of the opinion that Senjougahara wasn't really sick, but that it was only a façade. With a weight of fifty kilograms, she's neither sick nor ill. If you say she's strong, she must be an alien from a planet with ten times the gravity of that on Earth,

and must be pretty good at sports. Especially since she was in the track-and-field. Though she doesn't seem suited to fighting…

"It happened after I graduated from middle school, and before I entered high school," said Senjougahara. "In that odd period when I was neither a middle schooler nor a high schooler, even though it wasn't even spring break, I became like this."

"..."

"I met - a crab."

C-crab?

Did she say crab? Crab as in – the crab that you eat in winter?

With a shell and ten legs – an arthropod?

"It stole my weight."

"..."

"Well, you don't really have to understand. It'll be problematic for me if you continue asking questions, so I'm telling you now. Araragi-kun. Araragi-kun, hey, Araragi-kun."

Senjougahara called my name, repeatedly.

"I don't have weight – I don't have mass. Nothing that's remotely related to weight. It's not problematic for me at all. It's just like in 'Yousuke's Mysterious World'. Do you like Takahashi Shousuke?"

"..."

"The only person in this school who knows of this is Harukami-sensei, the school doctor. As of this moment, only Harukami-sensei. Not the principal Yoshiki-sensei, not the senior teacher Shima-sensei, not the

level headed Irinaka-sensei. Only Harukami-sensei – and you, Araragi-kun."

"..."

"So now, what should I do so that you will keep quiet about my secret? For my sake, what should I do? Other than 'tearing apart your mouth' so that you can't speak, what should I do so that you will swear to 'keep your mouth shut'?"

Cutter-knife.

Stapler.

Is she all right? What a forceful approach to her classmate. Is it all right for someone like her to exist? When I think about the fact that I'd been sitting in the same room, beside such a scary human being for more than two years, shivers run down my spine.

"According to the doctors at the hospital, the reason is unknown – or rather, there should be no reason. After doing what they wanted with my body, what an insulting answer. That it must have been like that from the beginning, that it was the only thing they could say," said Senjougahara self-deprecatingly.

"Don't you think that it's absurd? Even though I was a perfectly normal, perfectly cute girl until middle school."

"..."

Let's ignore the fact that she called herself cute.

She really had been going to the hospital.

Tardiness, leaving early, absences.

And – the school doctor.

I wonder what he thought about it.

Like me, just like me, only not in the short space of the two weeks of spring break, but always.

What had she given up on?

What had she forsaken?

Enough time had passed.

“Are you going to pity me? How kind of you.”

As if she had seen into my thoughts, she spoke insultingly. As if everything was filthy.

“But I don’t want your pity.”

“...”

“What I want is your silence and your indifference. Do you think you’re capable of that? You want to treasure your unblemished cheeks, don’t you?”

Senjougahara smiled.

“Araragi-kun, if you can promise me silence and indifference, nod twice. I will treat any other action as an offensive move and will attack accordingly.”

What a one-sided speech.

Left with no choice, I nodded twice.

“I see.”

Senjougahara seemed relieved by my choice of action. Even though I had been left with no choice, even though she had been the one bargaining, even though her request was one that I could not deny – she seemed relieved by the fact that I had accepted it.

“Thank you.” As she said that, she removed her cutter-knife from my mouth, not carefully, but excruciatingly, slowly. She put away the cutter-knife.

Next was the stapler-

“…Urgh!?”

Snap.

Unbelievable.

Senjougahara closed the stapler forcefully.

And before I could respond to the pain, she removed the stapler.

I collapsed onto the floor.

Clutching the side of my mouth in pain.

“O…ouch”

“You won’t scream. How admirable,” said Senjougahara, looking down with an uncaring face.

“I’ll let you off with this. If you hate your own incompetence, you may keep your side of the bargain without an ounce of sincerity.”

“...Y-you”

Snap.

As I was about to say something, Senjougahara pressed down on the stapler, as if she was going to bind something together.

The staple fell before my very eyes.

Naturally, I shivered.

A conditioned reflex.

With just one attempt – she created a conditioned reflex.

“All right then, Araragi-kun, from tomorrow onwards, please make sure to ignore me. I’m depending on you.”

After saying that, without waiting for my response, she went down the stairs. Before I could get up from my crouch, she had turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

“Ah, what a devil-like woman.”

Our brains are definitely constructed differently.

Even though all of that had happened, despite that, in some part of my brain, I'd thought she wouldn't do it. The fact that she chose the stapler instead of the cutter-knife should give me hope.

I stroked my cheek, not to ease the pain, but to ascertain its state.

“...”

All right.

She hadn’t pierced through.

And then, I inserted my finger into my mouth. My left finger, because it was my right cheek. I felt my way in.

The pain was not gone, nor was it so weak that I couldn’t find the staple – but there was only one of it. As expected, it was only meant as a threat, and it could still be considered a peaceful attempt… though truthfully, I had been hoping for that.

Oh well.

The fact that it hadn’t pierced through my cheek meant that the staple had not bent… it was still in its original shape, with the sharp ends pointed outwards. That meant that she had not used her full force.

With my thumb and forefinger, I pulled it out in one go.

The sharp pain was mixed with the iron taste of blood.

Blood was spurting out, it seems.

“Ow...”

It’s all right.

If it’s only this, I’ll be fine.

As I licked the two holes on the inside of my cheek, I folded the ends of the staple and slipped it into the pocket of my jacket. I picked up the staple that Senjougahara dropped and repeated the action. It’ll be dangerous if someone who wasn’t wearing shoes stepped on it. I couldn’t help but treat these staples as dangerous objects like Magnum bullets.

“Eh? Why are you still here, Araragi-kun?” said Hanekawa as she stepped out of the classroom.

It seemed like she’d finished the papers.

That took quite a bit of time.

Or should I say, nice timing.

“Shouldn’t you hurry to Oshino-san’s place?” asked Hanekawa.

It was like she hasn't realized anything.

She had been on the other side of the wall. It was a very thin wall. Despite that, without letting Hanekawa notice anything, she managed to pose such a threat. Senjougahara Hitagi is truly someone to be feared.

“Hanekawa… Do you like bananas?”

“Eh? Well, I don’t hate them. They're nutritious, and if I had to decide, I guess I do like them.”

“No matter how much you like them, don’t eat them in school!”

“W-what?”

“Well, it’s fine if you eat them in school, but if you leave the peel on the staircase, I’ll never forgive you!”

“What on earth are you talking about, Araragi-kun!?” said Hanekawa, looking exasperated.

That’s to be expected.

“More importantly, Araragi-kun, what about Oshino-san –”

“I’m heading there now,” I said.

As I said that, I left Hanekawa and dashed off. “Ah, hey, Araragi-kun! You shouldn’t run in the corridors! I'll tell the teacher!” I heard Hanekawa shout behind me, but I ignored her.

I ran.

In any case, I ran.

Turning the corner, the staircase.

This is the fourth floor.

She can’t be too far away.

Hop, step, jump, I flew down the stairs, landing as softly as if I was dancing.

The shock of the impact on my feet.

The impact of gravity.

Even this kind of impact –

Senjougahara couldn't feel it.

No weight.

No mass.

Her doubtful footsteps.

A crab.

She had talked about a crab.

"This way – nope, this way."

She wouldn't try to hide. She wouldn't think that I would chase after her, so she should be heading straight for the school gate. She has no club activities, so she must be one of those who head straight home after school. Even if she did have something on, it won't be starting at this time. Once I had come to that conclusion, I went down the staircase, past the third and second floors without hesitation. Leaping down.

And from the second floor to the first.

Senjougahara was there.

From the noise I was making, she must have already known that I was coming, and even though I was approaching her from the back, she was already turning around to face me.

With those cold eyes.

"Astounding," she said.

"No, I should truly be flabbergasted. You are the first to rebound so quickly after that, Araragi-kun."

"The first…"

That meant that there had been others.

Though she made so much fuss about it.

But, it was true, once I thought about it, that her secret of “having no weight” was one that would be exposed upon contact. It was realistically speaking, impossible.

Come to think of it, she had said “as of this moment”.

She might really be the devil.

“In any case, I had not thought you would be able to recover from the pain in your cheek. Normally, you wouldn’t have been able to move from that spot.”

The voice of experience.

Too scary.

“All right, I get it. I understand now, Araragi-kun. Your attitude of ‘an eye for an eye’ doesn’t sit well with me. I hope you’re prepared for this,” said Senjougahara, as she stretched her hands out by her side.

“Let’s fight.”

Starting with pen knives and staplers, all sorts of stationeries appeared in those hands. Sharpened HB pencils, compass, multi-coloured ballpens, mechanical pencils, superglue, rubber bands, paper clips, gachuck(ie. paper shark) , marker pens, safety pins, fountain pens, correction fluid, scissors, cellophane tapes, sewing kits, isosceles triangle rulers, thirty-centimetre rulers, protractors, glue, carving tools, drawing tools, paper weights, ink pots.

…

I got the feeling that I would be persecuted in the future for no other reason than having been in the same class as this person.

Personally, I felt that the instant adhesive was the most dangerous.

“…you’re mistaken. I’m not here to fight.”

“You aren’t?” She sounded disappointed.

But she didn’t relax her arms.

The assorted weaponry glistened.

“Then, what business do you have with me?”

“This is just a possibility, but,” I said, “I might be able to help you.”

“Help me?” I could tell from her tone that she was laughing at me.

No, she might be infuriated.

“Don’t joke. I’m sure I told you that I detest people who pity me. What do you think you are capable of? It’ll be sufficient if you shut your mouth and stay away.”

“…”

“I’ll treat your kindness as an act of hostility,” she said, as she took a step towards me.

Her lack of hesitation was a fact that I knew only too well, from the previous skirmish. One that I did not want to know about.

That’s why.

That’s why, without saying anything, I peeled back my lips with a finger and showed her my cheek.

With my right finger, and showed her my right cheek.

Exposing the inside of my cheek.

“Eh?”

As expected, Senjougahara was shocked. With a clatter, the weapons in her hands fell onto the floor.

“You – how is that –” she could not complete her question.

That’s right.

There was not even the smell of blood.

The wound that Senjougahara had made with her stapler had already healed without a trace.

Hitagi Crab - 004

It all happened during spring break.

I was attacked by a vampire.

In a time with mobile phones and cars, and when it was normal to travel overseas for a school trip... It’s rather embarrassing to say this, but I was attacked by a vampire.

She was a breathtaking beauty.

A beautiful monster.

A very – beautiful monster.

It’s usually hidden under the collar of my school jacket, but on the nape of my neck, her bite marks remain. Before it gets warm, I’m thinking of letting my hair grow to cover it up, but more importantly - there are probably lots of stories where when one is attacked by a vampire, people like vampire hunters, specialists in killing vampires, or a special division of the Christian Church, or a group of vampires who hunt their own kind will appear to save you- but, in my case, I was saved by a passing stranger.

Because of that, I was able to return to being a human being – I’m fine with sunlight, crosses and garlic – but there were side-effects; my physical abilities had improved. Though I say that, I don't mean my physical abilities, but my metabolism has increased; my ability to heal myself. I don’t know what would have happened if my cheek had been ripped apart by that cutter-knife, but it takes less than thirty seconds to heal the wound made by the staple. Compared to other living creatures, that's pretty fast.

“Oshino – Oshino-san?”

“That’s right. Oshino Meme.”

“Oshino Meme, you say… it certainly sounds like a moe name.”

“Don't get your expectations too high. He’s a thirty-plus year old man.”

“I see. But he must have been a moe character when he was young.”

“Don’t judge real people like that. More importantly, you understand what "moe" and "character" are?

“It’s common knowledge,” said Senjougahara, looking composed.

“They call my character ‘tsundere’, don’t they?”

“…”

I think they call your character a ‘tsundra’.

Small talk.

From Naoetsu High, where Hanekawa, Senjougahara and I go to, it takes about twenty minutes to get to a cram school that was located outside the residential area.

Was located.

A few years ago, because of the sudden influx of famous cram schools, this particular school had closed down due to financial problems. By the time I came to know about this four-floored building, it had already fallen into an awe-inspiring state of disrepair, so what I know of its history is only from rumors.

Dangerous.

Private property.

Access prohibited.

Though the building was surrounded by a safety fence and a mess of poster boards, holes in the fence were aplenty, so entry and exit was both possible and easy.

And in the midst of that rubble was where Oshino lived.

Where he decided to make his home.

Including spring break, it had been about a month.

“In any case, my butt hurts. And there are wrinkles on my skirt.”

“It’s not my fault.”

“Stop making excuses. I’ll chop it to pieces.”

“Chop what to pieces!?”

“Shouldn’t you be nicer to me because it’s my first time riding a bicycle with someone else?”

Didn’t you propose that kindness is an action of hostility?

Her words and actions contradict each other.

“All right then, what should we do?”

“Well. As an example, how about lending me your bag as a cushion?”

“Don’t you care about others?”

“Don’t address me so casually. I said it was an example, didn’t I?”

What did I answer to that?

An excellent question.

“Tsk. Compared to you, Mary Antoinette was probably more humble and modest.”

“She’s my pupil.”

“What happened to the years between you two!?”

“Can you please stop interrupting me? You’ve been overly friendly. If others didn’t know better, they’d think that we were classmates.”

“But we are!”

To what extent is she going to deny our relationship?

It just seems too much to me.

“Geez… It’s going to take quite a bit of patience to deal with someone like you, isn’t it…”

“Araragi-kun, that sentence makes it sound as if it’s my character, and not yours, that’s problematic, you know?” said Senjougahara.

“More importantly, where’s your bag? You’re empty-handed, aren’t you? Don’t you have one?”

That reminds me, I've never seen Senjougahara carrying anything.

“The information in the textbooks is already in my head. That’s why I leave everything in the school locker. If I have all my stationery with me, I don’t need a bag. Since I don’t need a change of clothes for physical education classes either.”

“I see.”

“If I don’t have my hands free, I won’t be able to fight when the time comes.”

“…”

Her whole body is a weapon.

A human weapon.

“Though I’m against leaving sanitary items in school, that’s about the only thing that bothers me. I can’t borrow from others, since I don’t have friends.”

“Don’t say that so casually.”

“What’s wrong? Since it is for sanitary purposes, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Hiding it would be more disgusting, don’t you think?”

I think hiding it is also rather problematic.

Well, it’s up to the individual.

It’s not my place to comment on it.

More importantly, what had caught my attention was the way she had dismissed her lack of friends.

“Oh, that reminds me.”

Not that I really cared about it, but the previous issue about skirts had brought to my attention the fact that Senjougahara was a girl after all and wouldn’t want to dirty her clothes. Because of that, I made some effort to search for a bigger entrance and upon reaching it, I turned to her.

“I’ll hold your 'stationery'.”

“What?”

“I’ll hold them for you, so take them out.”

“What did you say?”

She looked as if I had made an unreasonable request to her. As if there was something wrong with my head.

“Though Oshino is kind of a weird guy, he’s my saviour.”

Besides.

He's also Hanekawa's saviour.

"I won't let him meet someone dangerous, so I'll hold onto your stationery."

"I didn't expect you to say that after we'd arrived." Senjougahara glared at me. "You tricked me, didn't you?"

"…"

Do you have to put it that way?

Senjougahara did not say anything, but her expression was a mixture of serious contemplation and conflict. She stared at a point near her feet, but turned her head to glare at me several times.

I thought that we might leave without going inside, but after a while, Senjougahara said "I understand" as if she had made up her mind.

"Hold out your hands."

With that, the stationeries fell from her as if they were a thousand petals, as if it was a magic show and she was pulling off a trick. The stationery she had threatened me with back in the corridor had barely been the tip of the iceberg. Her pockets might be four dimensional. It might be a twenty-second century technology. Even though I had said I would hold them for her, the amount made me worry if they would fit in my bag.

The government must be neglecting public safety allowing someone like her to be walking freely about in public.

"Don't misunderstand. It doesn't mean that I trust you now," said Senjougahara, when she had finished passing me all her stationeries.

“What do you mean, trust…”

“If you’re thinking of leading me on, bringing me to such an isolated ruin, thinking to pay me back for the stapler wound, then you’re making a huge mistake.”

“…”

Well, I think it’s a mistake too.

“Listen carefully. If I don't call them every minute, five thousand of my minions would go after your family.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Are you saying that it’ll only take a minute?!”

“Do you take me for some boxer?”

More importantly, how dare you threaten my family.

How outrageous.

Five thousand people, what a huge lie.

A daring lie for someone who doesn’t even have friends.

“You have two younger sisters in middle school, don’t you?”

“…”

She knows about my family.

Even if it’s a lie, that’s not a joke.

Anyway, I had shown her my invincibility against injuries and it seems like she doesn’t trust me at all because of that. In view of the fact that Oshino had said that trust was important, this was not a good situation.

Well, it can’t be helped.

From now on, it’s Senjougahara’s personal problem.

I'm only the guide.

Past the wire netting, we entered the area and into the building. Even though it was only evening, it was pretty dim. Because the building had been left in disrepair for so long, the footing was bad, and if one wasn’t careful one would stumble.

It was then that I realized.

If an empty can fell, it would be only an empty can, but to Senjougahara, it would be an empty can with ten times its normal weight.

If we think in relative terms...

Ten times the gravity, one-tenth of gravity, is a problem that, unlike in manga, cannot be clearly defined. The simplistic thinking that light weight equals high physical ability is wrong. Moreover, this is an unfamiliar place for her. It can’t be helped that Senjougahara is like a wild animal on guard.

Even if she is ten times faster, her strength is only one-tenth of what it was.

I understand why she was so reluctant to let go of the stationeries.

Also, why she doesn’t carry a bag.

“It’s this way.”

I stretched out my hand towards Senjougahara, who had stopped at the entrance, grabbing her wrist, and showing her the way. Senjougahara looked bewildered by my sudden movement, and muttered “what”, but she followed me closely.

“Don’t even think that I’ll thank you.”

“I get it.”

“Instead, you should be thanking me.”

“I don’t get that.”

“After all, I purposely planned for that wound to be on the inside of your cheek so it wouldn't show.”

“...”

No matter how you think about it, that sounds like something an attacker would say: “so it doesn't stand out so much, I’ll punch you in the stomach rather than the face”.

“In any case, if you had pierced through my cheek, it would have still stood out.”

“But you had thick skin to begin with, so I somehow concluded that it would be fine.”

“I can’t be happy about that. And what’s with that ‘somehow’?”

“My intuition is about ten percent accurate.”

“That’s low.”

“Well~” said Senjougahara, keeping her distance from me.

“But it seems like it was an unnecessary precaution after all.”

“...seems like it.”

“Would it hurt if I said immortality is convenient?”

Senjougahara’s question.

I answered. “Not anymore.”

Had it been during spring break.

If someone had said that to me... I would have died. It might have been a fatal wound.

“If you say it’s handy, it is. If you say that it’s not handy, it isn’t. That’s all there is to it.”

“You mean it’s neither, don’t you? That’s quite difficult to comprehend.” Senjougahara shrugged.

“It’s similar to whether ‘a possible danger’ is dangerous or not.”

“The ourai in that “possible danger” is all right, isn’t it?” (T/N: "possible danger" is pronounced as "ou rai ki ken", in which "ou rai" sounds like "all right".)

“Is it?”

“Anyways, I’m no longer immortal. I’m just a human with faster healing than normal, that’s all.”

“Hmm. I see,” said Senjougahara in a bored tone.

“Even though I was intending to try out all sorts of things. How disappointing.”

“Seems like you had made all sorts of weird plans without informing me…”

“How insulting. I had only planned to ___ to ___ you, that’s all.

“What’s ___!?”

“I just wanted to try out *this* and *that*.”

“Explain the italicized parts!”

Oshino was usually on the fourth floor.

There was an elevator, but as expected, it wasn’t working. Therefore, the only options were to break into the ceiling of the elevator and

follow the wires to the fourth floor, or to take the stairs. No matter how one thought about it, the second option was better.

Holding Senjougahara's hand, we climbed the stairs.

"Araragi-kun. I have one last thing to say."

"What is it?"

"Though I may look like this, under my clothes, my body is unexpectedly not worth the jail time."

"..."

Senjougahara Hitagi seems to be quite suspicious of me.

"Can't you understand a roundabout expression? Then I'll say it directly. If you reveal your base nature and decide to strip yourself and try to rape me, no matter what happens, I'll definitely get my revenge on you like they do in BL."

"..."

She has zero prudence and no sense of shame.

What a terrifying person.

"It seems to me, not just from what you say, but from a general point of view, you seem to be overly self-conscious, as if you think of yourself as a victim?"

"How unpleasant. There are things you can say and things you can't?"

"You're fully aware of that!?"

"Still, that Oshino person of yours sure lives in a rundown building, doesn't he?"

"Ah... He's quite an eccentric person."

I still find it difficult to answer Senjougahara's questions.

"Shouldn't we have contacted him beforehand- though it's a bit late saying that now- since we're the ones asking him for a favor?"

"It's surprising to hear something like common sense from you, but unfortunately, he doesn't have a mobile phone."

"It seems like he's not one to reveal his true character. He sounds rather dubious. What does he do for a living?"

"I don't really know the details, but he's an expert in situations like ours."

"Hmm."

Though my explanation wasn't much of an explanation, Senjougahara did not press the issue. She may be thinking that she'd be meeting him anyway, that there wouldn't be any point in asking. Both seemed to be the correct interpretation.

"Ah, Araragi-kun, you're wearing your watch on your right wrist, aren't you?"

"Hmm? Ah, yeah."

"Are you warped?"

"Can't you just ask if I'm left-handed!"

"I see. So, are you?"

"…"

She's the one who's warped.

Fourth floor.

Since it was originally a cram school, the rooms were divided into three classrooms – for each of the classrooms, the doors were

broken and had blended into the corridors. I peeked into the first classroom, looking for Oshino,

“There you are, Araragi-kun. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Oshino Meme was there.

He was sitting cross-legged on a makeshift bed created from several worn-out tables that had been stacked and tied together with plastic strings, facing them.

As if he had known that I was coming. As usual – he can see through everything.

And, Senjougahara was – clearly, repulsed. Even though I had told her about Oshino, Oshino’s dirty state must be quite shocking to a modern high school girl’s sense of fashion. Anyone who lived in such a dump would certainly become quite ragged, but even a guy like me would say that Oshino is far from clean. One could only say that he wasn’t clean, if one wanted to be truthful. And more important than that, the psychedelic Hawaiian shirt was the last straw.

It always comes as kind of a shock that this person is my saviour...

He doesn’t seem anything like Hanekawa.

“Ooh. I see that you’ve brought a different girl today. I never see you with the same girl twice, do I? Really, I couldn’t be happier for you.”

“Cut that out, don’t make me sound like that kind of character.”

“Hmm – aren’t you?”

Oshino was staring at Senjougahara with a far-sighted look.

As if he was staring at something behind her.

“Nice to meet you, ojou-chan. I’m Oshino.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Senjougahara Hitagi.”

In any case, the self-introductions were done.

At least she hadn’t tried to insert any insults. Looks like she has some respect for the older generation.

“I’m Araragi-kun’s classmate, he was the one who told me about you.”

“Ah – I see,” said Oshino in a meaningful tone of voice.

Casting his eyes downwards, he took out a cigarette and held it between his lips, without lighting it. The windows, which were already unable to function as windows, contained only shards of glass, and Oshino seemed to be pointing at the far distance.

And after a long silence, he turned towards me.

“Do you like girls with straight bangs, Araragi-kun?”

“As I said, don’t make me sound like that kind of character. Only lolicons like straight bangs. Don’t mix me into your generation where adolescence was when Full House was on.

“Of course,” laughed Oshino.

At that, Senjougahara frowned.

She seemed to have been insulted by the term ‘loli’.

“Well – I guess it’ll be better if you ask her directly, but anyways, Oshino – two years ago, she –”

“Don’t talk about me so informally,” said Senjougahara resolutely.

“Then how do you want me to call you?”

“Senjougahara-sama.”

"…"

Is she sane?

"…Sen-jou-ga-ha-ra-sa-ma." Long, drawn-out, and sarcastic.

"I don't like the way you pronounced that. Say it properly."

"Senjougahara-chan."

She jabbed her fingers into my eyes.

"I'll go blind!"

"That's because you were rude."

"What's with that equivalent exchange!?"

"My abusive words are filled with forty grams of copper, twenty five grams of zinc, fifteen grams of nickel, five grams of embarrassment and ninety seven kilograms of spite."

"That's mostly spite, isn't it!"

"By the way, the bit about embarrassment was a joke."

"You just took out the most important ingredient!"

"You sure are noisy. If you don't keep it down, I'm going to give you the nickname 'menstrual pain'."

"That sounds like a suicide monster!"

"What's your problem? It's just as the word suggests, so there's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"That and being spiteful are different issues!"

Senjougahara seemed satisfied with that and turned to face Oshino.

“I'd like to inquire about something.” Rather than just Oshino, her tone of voice suggested that she was addressing both Oshino and me, as she pointed to the corner of the classroom.

In that corner, there was a young girl – young enough that she wouldn't have entered high school yet - hugging her knees. She looked about eight years old, wearing an old pilot helmet and goggles, with white skin and blonde hair, hugging her knees in the corner.

“What on earth is that child?”

“What”, rather than "who", she asks, which meant that Senjougahara was perceptive. Anyways, even if it had not been Senjougahara, most perceptive people would have noticed that there was something different about the girl, especially since she stared at Oshino with an insecure look.

“Ah, you don’t have to worry about her,” I explained, before Oshino could say anything.

“She’s just sitting there, she won’t do anything so – it’ll be fine. She has neither a shadow nor a shape. A child without a name, without existence.”

“Oh, no, no, Araragi-kun,” interrupted Oshino. “You’re right that she has neither shadow, shape nor existence, but I gave her a name yesterday. Since she was pretty useful during Golden Week, and it would be inconvenient if she doesn't have a name. Also, as long as she doesn’t have a name, she’ll remain an atrocity.”

“Hmm – a name. What did you name her?”

“Oshino Shinobu.”

“Shinobu – hmm.”

A truly Japanese name.

Though it doesn’t really matter in this case.

“A heart under a blade. A good name, fitting for her, don’t you think? I gave her my family name. It happens that the Kanji character for “Shinobu” is also part of my name. Serving two purposes and having threefold meaning. Quite a tasteful name, don’t you think? I quite like it myself.”

“Does it really matter?”

More like, it doesn’t matter to me.

“I considered quite a few, and narrowed it down to Oshino Shinobu or Oshino Oshino, but I picked the one that sounded better instead of the one that played with phonetics. I think Ms. Class Representative would be quite happy with the choice of the Kanji too.”

“It’s fine.”

I really don’t care.

Though ‘Oshino” is out of the question.

“Like I said.”

In a tone of voice that suggested that she had had quite enough of this inscrutable talk, Senjougara asked,

“What on earth is that child?”

“Like I said – nothing.”

The ruins of a vampire.

The hollow remains of a beautiful monster.

No matter what I said, it couldn't be helped, could it? Anyways, it wasn't related to Senjougahara, but my own problem. As long as I live, it's a burden that I will have to carry.

"Nothing, you say. Fine."

"..."

What an indifferent woman.

"My paternal grandmother often said that it doesn't matter if I was indifferent, as long as I was brought up to be wakumashiku, it's fine."

"What's wakumashiku?" (ie. yakumashiku = insignificant)

She mispronounced it.

Just like pronouncing oosodokkusu(orthodox) as oodosokkusu.

"More importantly."

Senjougahara shifted her gaze from the ex-vampire, a girl with white skin and blonde hair, aka Oshino Shinobu, to Oshino Meme.

"I heard that you could help me."

"Me? That's impossible," said Oshino in a joking tone of voice.

"Only you can help yourself, ojou-chan."

"..."

Wow.

Senjougahara's eyes narrowed to half their normal size.

She's plainly suspicious.

"Till today, there have been five people who'd told me those exact words. They were all conmen. Are you one of them, Oshino-san?"

“Hahhaa. Ojou-chan, you sure are energetic. Did something good happen to you?”

Why on earth are you using such provocative words? There are those on whom those words will work, like Hanekawa, but it won’t work on Senjougahara.

She’s the type who'd step up to the challenge.

“All right, all right.”

I reluctantly stepped in to mediate.

I forcefully inserted myself between them.

“Don’t interrupt. I’ll kill you."

“...”

Right now, this woman, rather casually, talked about killing me.

Why am I always in the line of fire?

She’s like a bomb.

Good god, I don’t have the words to describe her.

“Well, in any case,” said Oshino rather offhandedly, in contrast to the tense situation.

“If you don’t tell me about your situation, we won’t be able to get anything done. I’m not very good at reading people’s minds. If you don’t talk, I won’t be able to get at the heart of the problem. I’ll keep your secret for you, so don’t worry.”

“...”

“Ah. Well. I’ll explain a bit first – ”

“It’s okay, Araragi-kun.”

Senjougahara interrupted me again.

“I’ll do it myself.”

“Senjougahara.”

“I can do it myself,” she said.

Hitagi Crab - 005

Two hours later.

I was at Senjougahara's apartment, leaving Oshino and Shinobu behind in the abandoned cram school.

Senjougahara's home.

Tamikura-sou, it was called.

A two-story wooden apartment building, built thirty years ago. Tin mailboxes by the door. A shower and flush toilet included, grudgingly, in each apartment. One six-mat room with a tiny sink. Twenty minutes walk to the nearest bus stop. Rent ran from thirty to forty thousand, depending on the room (including upkeep, utilities, and neighborhood association fees.)

Not exactly what Hanekawa had led me to believe.

It must have shown on my face. Without me even asking, Senjougahara said, flatly, "My mother joined a cult."

Like that was an excuse.

She was clearly glossing over a lot.

"Not only did she hand over all our money to them, she ran up huge debts donating to them. Your house goeth before a fall."

"A cult?"

One of those dangerous new age 'religions.'

They all led to the same results.

"They finally agreed to divorce at the end of last year. My father got me, and we live here. At least, I do...but all the debt is in my father's name, so he's working night and day to pay it off, and almost never makes it home. I pretty much live here alone. With all the freedom that entails."

Sounded great.

"But the official address on the school rolls is the old one, still. Hanekawa-san wouldn't have known."

Um...

Shouldn't you change it?

"I prefer potential enemies not know where I live."

"Everyone's an enemy, hunh?"

Usually, that would sound like an exaggeration. But with a secret you were desperate to protect, it may well have been a reasonable level of caution.

"Senjougahara. When your mother joined this cult...was she trying to help you?"

"What an awful question," she laughed. "I don't know. Maybe not."

An awful answer.

Probably what I get for asking.

It had been an awful question. The thought alone made my stomach churn. I should not have asked, and because I did ask, Senjougahara was absolutely right to unleash the full power of her tongue.

Of course her family would have noticed their daughter no longer weighed anything. Especially her mother. Family wasn't like school,

where we each owned a little space around our desks. If something terrible happened to your only daughter, you'd notice at once. And when the doctors had no idea how to help, and the tests went on and on, no one could blame her mother for seeking help in other places.

No, perhaps we could blame her.

It wasn't my place to say.

I shouldn't talk like I understood anything.

At any rate.

At any rate, there I was in Senjougahara's house, Tamikura-sou room 201, sitting on a cushion staring at the steam rising off the tea she'd given me.

Given her personality, I had assumed she'd make me wait outside, but she waved me inside, and even made tea. This came as something of a shock.

"I'm going to torture you."

"Um..."

"I meant welcome you."

"Right..."

"No, maybe I did mean torture."

"I much preferred welcome! No other option is acceptable! Not everyone can correct their own mistakes! Well done, Senjougahara-san!"

And that's all the conversation we really had. I wound up just sitting there, flustered. I couldn't very well admit I felt awkward entering the house of a girl I'd just met. All I could do was stare at my tea.

Senjougahara was taking a shower.

Cleansing her body, purifying herself.

Oshino had told her to wash her body in cold water, and then change clothes -- they didn't need to be new or anything, just clean.

And I had accompanied her back. She'd ridden my bike from school to Oshino's, so there was that, but Oshino had also left a few other instructions.

I looked around the room. It was really bare bones -- hard to believe a teenage girl lived here. I leaned back against the chest of drawers behind me.

Reflecting on Oshino's diagnosis.

When Senjougahara finished telling him of her condition, Oshino nodded, stared at the ceiling for a long moment, and finally said, "A Crab of Burden."

"And that is?" Senjougahara pressed.

"Folk legend in the mountains of Kyushu. Some places call it a Crab of Burden, some places a Heavy Crab, or a Deadweight Crab, some places even call it a God instead. Kami and Kani don't sound that different, after all. The details of it vary, but the one thing they all have in common is that they take away people's weight. People that meet them -- that meet them the wrong way -- it's like they don't exist the same way they used to."

"It changes the way you exist?"

You became fragile.

Delicate.

And more beautiful.

"In some cases, people cease to exist at all. If you go higher up the country there's something called the Rock of Burden, but I don't think they're related. One's a rock and one's a crab."

"So...is it really a crab?"

"You are dumb, Araragi-kun," Oshino sounded completely disgusted with me. "We're talking Miyazaki Prefecture...maybe Oita, too. They don't even have crabs. It's just a story. And things they don't come across often are easier to make shit up about. Just like it's easier to get worked up about delusions and gossip."

"Are crabs even all that Japanese?"

"You may have eaten the American kind. But you should read up on your old Japanese stories, Araragi-kun. You never heard The Crab and the Monkey? Russia has a famous story about a crab, and China has some too. Japan is no exception."

"Oh, right. I've heard that story. Or I've heard of it. But...why Miyazaki?"

"Who was it who got attacked by a vampire in a dozy country town? The place doesn't really matter. Only the conditions that were born there."

Although even Oshino admitted the local climate played a factor.

"Didn't have to be a crab, really. Could've been a rabbit. Some stories even have it as a beautiful woman -- not like Shinobu-chan or anything, but the stories exist."

"Hunh...like the patterns on the moon."

Were we calling her Shinobu-chan already?

Suddenly I felt sorry for her.

Once a legendary vampire...

Now addressed as -chan.

"But if you say you met a crab, then let's assume it was a crab. Most common type, after all."

"But what is it?" Senjougahara growled. "I don't give a crap what the thing is named."

"But you do. The name is everything. Like I just told Araragi-kun, they don't have crabs in the mountains of Kyushu. They have some up North, but not a lot of them made their way down to Kyushu."

"They have freshwater ones."

"Maybe so, but that's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"That it didn't used to be crabs. It used to be gods -- kami, not kani. The god of burden evolved into a crab. I mean, this is just my personal theory. Most people would assume it went the other way around. Or at least insist they were both around from the beginning."

"Either way, I've never heard of them."

"Of course you have," Oshino said. "You met one."

That silenced her.

"And it's still with you."

"Can you...see it?"

"I can't see anything," Oshino said, chuckling merrily. An inappropriately pleasant laugh, that clearly rubbed Senjougahara the wrong way.

It had a similar effect on me.

He was clearly mocking her.

"Isn't that your job?"

"Is it? The whole point of chimi-moryo is that no one can see them. Can't see them, can't touch them. That's only normal."

"Normal. But..."

"Ghosts ain't got legs, vampires don't have reflections, but that's not the point, is it? Things like that can't be pinned down. And tell me this, girl -- if no one can see them, and no one can touch them...do they exist?"

"Do they...you just said they did!"

"I did. But nobody can see them and nobody can touch them, then scientifically speaking, they don't exist. Doesn't matter if they're real or not."

That was his point.

Senjougahara did not seem satisfied.

It was sound logic, but not something she could just accept.

Not in her position.

"Well, girl, you may have bad luck, but you're on the lucky side of bad luck. Araragi-kun here didn't just meet his; he was attacked. And attacked by a vampire. Is there anything more embarrassing for modern man?"

Drop it.

Drop it now.

"You're much better off than he was."

"Why?"

"Because gods are everywhere. They're everywhere, and nowhere. It was with you before your present condition arrived...but you could also say it wasn't."

"Is that some sort of Zen?"

"Shinto. Shugendo, specifically," Oshino said. "You need to understand, girl. You didn't wind up like this because of something else. You just changed your point of view."

She was always like that.

Almost exactly what the doctors said, as they threw in the towel.

"My point of view? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying, you need to stop acting like a victim, girl," Oshino snarled, sudden heat behind his words.

He'd been like this with me.

And like this with Hanekawa.

I was worried about how Senjougahara would react, but she didn't say a word.

She just accepted it.

This seemed to impress him a little. "Well done. Guess you aren't just a selfish little girl after all."

"What made you think I was?"

"Most people who encounter Crabs of Burden are. Not the kind of thing you can meet just by wanting to, and not the kind of harmful god. Not like vampires."

They don't harm?

They don't harm you...so they don't attack?

"They don't possess you. They just exist. Unless you want a change, then nothing will change. Now, I'm not wanting to pry into other people's business. I don't want to help you, after all."

She would have to save herself.

Like Oshino always said.

"Stop me if you've heard this. It's an old story from overseas. Once upon a time, there was a young man. He was a good man. One day, this young man met a strange old man in the village. The old man asked the young man to sell him his shadow."

"His shadow?"

"Yeah. The shadow that sprang from his legs when the sun shone upon him. Sell it for ten coins. The young man did, without a second's thought. Sold his shadow for ten coins."

"...so?"

"What would you have done?"

"Dunno. Wouldn't know without that actually happening to me. Maybe I'd sell, maybe I wouldn't. Depends on the price."

"That's the right answer. If I asked you which was more important, your money or your life, well...that question's wrong to begin with. 'Money' doesn't mean anything. There's a big difference between one yen and a trillion. One is worth more than the other. Life means more to some people than it does to others. All life is equal? I loathe the very idea. Anyway, this young man didn't think his shadow was worth more than ten coins. Why would he? What would you miss out

on, if you had no shadow? What problems could that possibly cause?"

Oshino shuddered.

"But once he lost his shadow, everyone in town, even his family, hated him. He couldn't get along with anybody. Having no shadow...was creepy. Of course it was. Hella creepy. Shadows themselves can be pretty creepy, but not having a shadow is even creepier. The absence of something you're supposed to have. In other words, the young man had sold something he was meant to have...for ten coins."

He let that hang for a moment.

"The young man went looking for the old man, to get his shadow back. But no matter where he went, no matter who he asked, he never did find the man. The end."

"So," Senjougahara said, not batting an eye. "What of it?"

"Well, nothing, really. Just thought it might be a story that struck a chord with you. The young man may have sold his shadow, but you lost your weight."

"I didn't sell it."

"No. You did not. You traded it. Losing your weight may not be as big a problem as losing your shadow...but it causes just as many problems, socially. That's it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm done talking," he said, and clapped his hands, once. "Okay. If you'd like to get your weight back, then I'll do what I can. Araragi-kun introduced you, after all."

"You'll help me?"

"I will not. I'll just do what I can," Oshino said, glancing at his watch. On his left wrist. "Sun's still out, so head on home. Wash your body in cold water, put on some clean clothes. Got some preparations on my end. If you're in Araragi-kun's class, you're probably a pretty serious student, so I should ask...are you able to come out at night?"

"Yes. If the occasion demands."

"Then we'll meet up again here at the stroke of midnight."

"Fine. By clean clothes, you mean...?"

"Don't need to be new. Not your uniform, though. You wear that every day."

"And what do I owe you?"

"Mm?"

"Don't play dumb. You're not doing this on a volunteer basis."

"Oh, hmm..." Oshino glanced over me, as if appraising me. "Well, if that makes you feel better about it, then a hundred thousand yen."

"A hundred thousand," she said, as if confirming it.

"Work part time at a fast food place a month or two, and you ought to earn that much easily. Seems fair."

"Quite a bargain, compared to mine."

"Is it? I charged class-rep chan a hundred grand as well."

"And you charged me five million!"

"Well, you were a vampire."

"You can't blame everything on vampires! Who cares if they're trendy right now!"

"Can you pay?" he asked, ignoring my cries.

"Of course," she said. "No matter what I have to do."

And then...

Two hours later, in her room.

Senjougahara's apartment.

I looked around again.

A hundred thousand yen might not be that much normally, but judging from the state of her room, it was probably quite a lot to Senjougahara.

A chest of drawers, a tea table, and a little bookcase. That was it. For all the books she read, there were surprisingly few in her room. She must get the bulk of them from used book stores and libraries.

Like an impoverished student.

Which, I suppose, Senjougahara was.

She'd said she was attending school on a scholarship.

Oshino had suggested Senjougahara was luckier than me, but I had my doubts.

Certainly, her life wasn't in the same kind of danger, and she was less of a danger to those around her -- few things came close to vampires on those two fronts. I lost track of how many times I'd wished I'd just died instead, and that was an easy trap to fall back into, even now.

So, yeah.

Senjougahara might be on the lucky side of bad luck. But in light of how Hanekawa had described her life in junior high, it was really hard to see it that way.

It definitely wasn't a fair comparison.

Hanekawa...how did Hanekawa Tsubasa compare?

There was a woman with a powerfully strange experience.

I was attacked by a demon, Senjougahara met a crab, and Hanekawa was transfixed by a cat. Over Golden Week. What transpired was so overwhelming it felt like something in the distant past. But it had only been a few days before.

Although Hanekawa herself retained no memories of Golden Week. All she really knew was that Oshino had managed to take care of it some how, so perhaps she had no real grasp of just how bad things had been. But I remembered everything.

It was an absolute mess.

Even after surviving the demon. I had never imagined a cat could possibly be more terrifying than a demon.

Again, in light of risk to life and limb, Hanekawa's experience was worse than Senjougahara's. But in light of how long Senjougahara had suffered in silence, things weren't that simple.

It all mattered.

It was all worth considering.

How bad did things have to be for you to consider kindness the act of an enemy?

The young man who sold his shadow.

The girl who lost her weight.

I could never know.

I could never hope to understand.

"Done with my shower," Senjougahara said, stepping out of the bathroom.

Naked.

I shrieked, cowering.

"Move aside. I can't reach my clothes."

Senjougahara pointed at the chest of drawers behind me. She appeared to be more annoyed by her wet hair than she was concerned about me seeing her.

"Put some clothes on!"

"I plan to."

"You plan to!?"

"Would you prefer I didn't?"

"Why haven't you already!?"

"I forgot to bring some in with me."

"Then wrap a towel around yourself or something!"

"Ew, that would just be sad."

I didn't know how she could be so blasé about it.

It was plain as day there was no point in arguing the point, so I scooted out of the way, and plunked myself down in front of the bookshelf, studiously counting the spines in front of me. Trying to focus my gaze and my thoughts.

Augh.

I'd never seen a naked woman before...not in real life, anyway.

It wasn't quite what I'd imagined. I still maintain I had pretty grounded ideas about what it would be like, but what I'd imagined was not this...stark nudism, this frank indifference.

"Clean clothes...you suppose white is better?"

"No idea."

"All my underwear has patterns."

"None of my business!"

"I'm just asking for advice. No need to get so loud. Honestly, it's like you're going through menopause."

I heard the drawer open.

Clothing rustled.

This was bad.

It was burned into my brain. It wouldn't go away.

"Araragi-kun. You aren't turned on by me being naked, are you?"

"If I hypothetically was, it would not be my fault."

"Go ahead and lay a single finger on me. I hear biting off tongues is always fatal."

"Yes, yes, you're very protective of your body."

"I was planning on biting your tongue."

"That is duly terrifying."

Sheesh.

She seemed incapable of seeing the situation from my point of view.

Was it impossible for any human being to understand another?

Was this a notion I should just learn to accept?

"Don't worry, you can look now."

"Okay. Good."

I turned around.

She was still in her underwear.

Not even wearing socks.

"What are you trying to accomplish here!?"

"What do you think? I'm rewarding you for your help today. Be happy."

"....."

A reward?

Baffling.

I'd rather have an apology.

"Be happy!"

"Now you're mad!?"

"Manners dictate you express an opinion!"

"A-an opinion?"

Manners?

How should I answer?

Um...

"Y-you have a great body...?"

"...pathetic."

She gave me the sort of look usually reserved for rotting refuse.

But with a trace of pity.

"You'll always be a virgin."

"I'll always be...? Did you come from the future!?"

"Try not to spit. Virginity is catching."

"It's not a disease!"

Once lost, it never came back.

"For that matter, why have we simply assumed that I'm a virgin?"

"Because you are. No child would ever sleep with you."

"Two objections! First, I am not a pedophile! Secondly, I definitely think I could find a few if I looked hard enough!"

"If the first is true the second can't be."

"....."

Good point.

"But I admit it was presumptuous of me."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"If you've used a professional..."

"Okay, okay, I admit it! I'm a virgin!"

The most humiliating thing I had ever confessed to.

Senjougahara seemed very pleased.

"You should have said so in the first place. You've used up half the luck the rest of your life had allotted to it, so keep still and appreciate."

"Are you secretly a shinigami?"

Make a deal with a shinigami, see a naked girl.

Best shinigami eyes ever.

"Don't worry," she said. As she spoke, she took a white shirt out from her chest of drawers, and put it on over the light blue bra. It seemed ridiculous to count the books on her shelf again, so I just watched. "I won't tell Hanekawa-san."

"Hanekawa...?"

"You have a one-sided crush on her, right?"

"Not true."

"Oh? You talk so often I simply assumed. Hence the leading question."

"Who uses leading questions in real life?"

"Hush. Do you wish to be erased?"

"Just how much power do you wield?"

I was a bit surprised to hear Senjougahara had actually paid that much attention to the rest of us. I'd actually wondered if she even knew I was assistant class-rep. Or maybe she had just assumed we would one day be her enemies, and scouted us.

"It's less that we talk and more than she keeps talking to me."

"Who do you think you are? Are you trying to imply Hanekawa-san has a crush on you?"

"That's absolutely not true," I said. "Hanekawa is just...looking after me. She's a busybody, really. Overprotective. She's got this hilarious

idea that it's worth feeling sorry for losers. And she wants to help fix them."

"That is a hilarious idea," Senjougahara said. "Losers are losers because they were born stupid."

"...I wouldn't say that."

"But it's written on your face."

"It is not!"

"I thought you'd say that, so I wrote it there a moment ago."

"Nobody's that prepared!"

Frankly.

I didn't need to say much here; Senjougahara should understand Hanekawa as well as I did. Judging by what she'd told me after school, Hanekawa was paying more than a little attention to Senjougahara.

But perhaps that explained it.

"Oshino-san helped Hanekawa-san too?"

"Mm. Yeah."

Senjougahara finished buttoning her shirt, and proceeded to don a white cardigan on top of it. Apparently she planned to fully dress her upper body before putting anything else on the lower half. I suppose everyone had different ways of getting dressed. Senjougahara did not seem at all concerned that I was watching. Actually, she seemed to have deliberately placed herself in front of me.

"Hmm."

"So...I mean, you can trust him. He's not the most serious guy in the world; jaunty and cavalier and what have you, but he knows his stuff. Don't worry. You don't have to take my word for it. He did the same with Hanekawa."

"So you say, Araragi-kun," Senjougahara said. "But I'm afraid I only half trust him. I have been tricked too many times."

"....."

Five people had said the same thing.

They'd all been liars.

And...

That did not seem like the end of it.

"Even the hospital -- I only go out of inertia. Honestly, I've pretty much given up."

"Given up...?"

What had she given up?

What had she cast aside?

"This world may be bizarre, but it has neither Mugen Mamiya or Kudan Kumiko."

"....."

"The best it can manage is Touge Miroku," Senjougahara said, voice dripping with disgust. "So Araragi-kun, I'm simply not carefree enough to cheerily accept that I just happened to slip on the stairs and the classmate that just happened to catch me just happened to have been bit by a vampire over spring break and the person who

just happened to save him also just happened to help the class-rep and now he just happens to be attempting to help me."

And with that, Senjougahara began taking off her cardigan.

"Finally you had some clothes on -- why are you taking them off again?"

"I forgot to dry my hair."

"Are you actually a bit of an idiot?"

"Don't be rude. What if you hurt my feelings?"

Her dryer looked expensive.

Apparently she took pains towards her appearance.

Looking her over again, even her underwear was carefully chosen. It was odd how what had, a day before, been a major focus controlling a significant portion of my thoughts now seemed like little more than a few scraps of cloth. I shed a silent tear inside.

"Carefree...?"

"I'm not that."

"Maybe. But what if you were?" I said. "What if you were carefree?"

"....."

"It's not a bad thing to be. You've got nothing to hide, after all. Just be confident, like you are now."

"Like I am now?" Senjougahara said, baffled.

Apparently she was unaware just how amazing her performance here had been.

"It's not a bad thing...?"

"Is it?"

"Suppose not," she said. Then, "But I might be hiding something."

"Mm?"

"Never mind."

With her hair finally dry, she put the dryer down, and began putting clothes on again. Since she'd put them on over wet hair, her first outfit was damp, so she hung the shirt and cardigan up on hangers, and began hunting through her chest of drawers for something else.

"In my next life," Senjougahara said. "I want to be Sergeant Major Kululu."

"....."

This seemed like a non sequitur, yet it also made a certain kind of sense.

"I know what you want to say. That seemed like a non sequitur, and you don't see why I would."

"Uh, about half right."

"Thought so."

"I mean, at the least, you could have said Lance Corporal Dororo."

"His trauma switch hits a little too close to home."

"Okay, but..."

"No buts. Or mutts."

"Mutts?"

I couldn't even work out what she'd mistaken that for.

I'd totally lost track of her larger point as well.

Presumably she agreed, since she immediately changed the subject.

"May I ask you something, Araragi-kun? Not anything important."

"Okay."

"What did you mean by 'patterns on the moon'?"

"Hunh? When did I say that?"

"Earlier. To Oshino-san."

"Um..."

Oh.

Now I remembered.

"Right, Oshino was going on about it being a crab or a rabbit or a beautiful woman -- those. In Japan people generally say it looks like a rabbit with mochi but other countries have it as a crab or a woman's face in profile, or so on."

I hadn't verified this in person, but so I'd heard. Senjougahara appeared to have never come across the information before.

"I'm astonished you bothered retaining such useless information. For the first time ever, you've actually managed to impress me."

With useless information.

Kind of a backhanded compliment.

I decided to show off.

"I know a lot about astronomy and space. I was pretty into it for a while."

"Don't bother bragging to me. I see right through it. It's not like you know anything else."

"Words can hurt, you know."

"Then call the word police."

"....."

Even the real police were no match for her.

"I do know things! Like, um, for example, do you know why there's a rabbit on the moon?"

"There is no rabbit on the moon, Araragi-kun. You're in high school now, you should know these things."

"Say there is."

Wait, was that right?

Say there was?

Confusing.

"Once upon a time there was a god, or a Buddha maybe...same difference. There was a god, and for that god a rabbit threw itself onto a fire, and burned to death -- sacrificing itself to the god. This god was touched by this act of self-sacrifice, and put the rabbit on the moon so we'd never forget it."

I'd just seen the story on TV as a kid, and I didn't remember it all that well, so it wasn't exactly an exhaustive bit of knowledge, but I had the gist of it.

"Wow, that god is a prick. Made a mockery of that poor rabbit."

"That's not really the point."

"And the rabbit too -- you can totally see it trying to get on god's side by sacrificing itself. Scheming little shit."

"It's really not about that."

"Well, I certainly can't understand it," she snapped, and started taking off her clothes again.

"Okay, you're really just flaunting your body at me, aren't you?"

"I don't have a body worth flaunting. It was just inside out and backwards."

"That's quite an accomplishment."

"I'll admit I'm not great at getting dressed."

"You're like a child."

"No. They're heavy."

"Erp."

Missed that one.

If her shoes were heavy, her clothes would be too.

At ten times their regular weight, clothes were not to be trifled with.

I was ashamed.

It had been a careless remark, completely lacking in tact.

"I might get tired of this but I do not get used to it. But you are more learned than I expected, Araragi-kun. Allow me to express mild surprise. There may actually be a brain inside your skull."

"Of course there is."

"Of course...? That a brain can form inside the skull of your ilk is a miracle."

"Now you're just being mean."

"Don't worry, I'm just stating the truth."

"At least one person in this room clearly deserves to die."

"? Hoshina-sensei isn't here."

"Did you just wish death upon our beloved homeroom teacher?"

"Is the crab the same?"

"Hunh?"

"Did a crab throw itself on the fire like the rabbit?"

"Oh, um, no, I don't know the crab's story. Must have one somewhere. Never thought about it. Because the moon has seas?"

"The moon has no seas. And you seemed so sure you were saying something clever."

"Eh? It doesn't? But they --"

"Your knowledge of astronomy astounds. They are only seas in name."

"Oh."

Hmm.

I guess I couldn't compete with actual smart people.

"So your true identity is revealed, Araragi-kun. It was sloppy of me to expect anything but ignorance from you."

"You really do think I'm an idiot, don't you?"

"How did you know!?"

"You seem genuinely surprised!"

She thought she'd hidden it?

Really?

"This is all my fault. Because of me, you have realized what a mess your little mind is. I feel responsible."

"Hang on a minute, am I really this abysmally dumb?"

"Never fear. I do not judge people by their grades."

"You've already judged what mine are!"

"Try not to spit. Bad grades are catching."

"Look, we go to the same school."

"But will both of us graduate?"

"Erp..."

That was actually in doubt.

"I will move on to grad school. You will drop out of high school."

"I'm third year! I just have to finish it out!"

"Yet soon you will be begging me to let you quit, tears running down your cheeks."

"I've never heard anyone talk like that outside of manga!"

"Compare standard scores. Mine is 74."

"Argh."

She'd already won.

"Only 46."

"That rounds down to zero."

"What? No it doesn't, it's a six...wait, you're rounding down the tens place! What have you done to my standard score!?"

She had me beat by nearly thirty but had to whip the corpse!

"I don't feel I've won unless the margin is at least a hundred."

"You've rounded your own tens place, too!?"

Ruthless.

"Good, from now on, please remain at least twenty thousand kilometers away from me at all times."

"I've been banished from the Earth!?"

"Did that god even bother eating the rabbit?"

"Hunh? Oh, back to the story. Did he eat it? If the story covered that, it would be pretty grisly."

"It already is."

"I dunno. I'm stupid, remember?"

"Don't sulk. You might make me less happy."

"You have no pity at all, do you?"

"Pitying you will not bring peace to this world."

"If you can save a single soul, don't start talking globally! Extend a helping hand to those in front of you! I'm sure you can do it!"

"Okay, all done."

Senjougahara was now wearing a white tank top, a white jacket, and a white flare skirt.

"If this all goes well, a trip to Hokkaido to eat crab is in order."

"We can eat crab without going to Hokkaido, and it's out of season anyway, but if you want to, then go ahead."

"You're coming too."

"Why!?"

"Didn't you know?" Senjougahara smiled. "Crab is delicious."

Hitagi Crab - 006

Our home town was on the fringes of the suburbs.

At night it was very dark. Pitch black. The abandoned building was so distant from daylight it seemed the same inside or out.

I'd been born and raised here so this did not seem strange, did not seem mystifying in any way -- in fact, it was the normal order of things, the natural way of the world -- but Oshino had traveled far and wide, and he said that discrepancy was the root of many problems.

It was nice having the roots so easily found.

According to him, anyway.

At any rate...

It was just after midnight.

Senjougahara and I rode back to the ruined cram school. She had taken a cushion from her home and attached it to her seat on the back of the bike.

We'd eaten nothing, and were hungry.

I parked the bike in the same place, and we slipped through the gap in the fence. Oshino was waiting for us outside the door.

As if he'd been there the whole time.

"...eh?"

Oshino's clothing seemed to surprise Senjougahara.

He was wearing white holy robes -- jōe. He'd even combed his hair; he looked like a different person. One not at all slovenly.

Clothes make the man.

Why did he seem creepier like this?

"Oshino-san...you're a priest?"

"No, not at all?" he said. "Neither priest nor monk. Went to school for it, but never got a job. It was complicated."

"Complicated?"

"Personal reasons. Boils down to just getting sick of it all. The clothes serve the same function as yours. I just didn't have anything else clean. We're meeting a god here, so I've got to clean up, same as you. Set the right tone. Tone is important. When I fought Araragi-kun, I had a cross in one hand, a bunch of garlic hanging off me, and some Holy Water. Fit the situation. I may not have much use for manners, but I know what I'm doing here. You won't catch me waving a wand around and scattering salt on your head."

"O-okay," Senjougahara said.

It was certainly a surprise seeing him like this, but her reaction seemed a bit too strong. Why?

"You look nice and purified. Good. Just to be sure, you're not wearing make-up?"

"I didn't think it would be a good idea, so no."

"Good. Right decision. You took a shower too, Araragi-kun?"

"Yeah. No problem there."

It was a necessary step if I was going to sit in on things. I avoided mentioning Senjougahara's attempt to peek on me in the shower.

"Yet you look exactly the same."

"Yeah, yeah."

Since I was just an observer, I had not changed clothes at all. Of course I looked the same.

"Let's get this over with. Prepared a space upstairs."

"A space?"

"Yes."

Oshino vanished into the darkness inside. Even in white clothes he was swallowed instantly. Once again, I took Senjougahara's hand, and led her after him.

"'Let's get this over with?' Not exactly taking this seriously, then?" I asked.

"What's that supposed to mean? I've dragged two young kids out to a deserted location in the middle of the night. It's my responsibility to get you back home and in bed as soon as I can."

"I was just wondering if we can really kick this crab's ass that easily."

"What a violent proposition, Araragi-kun. Did something good happen?" Oshino said, not even glancing back. "It's not like you and Shinobu-chan, or class rep-chan and the sex cat. And don't forget, I'm a pacifist. I normally avoid violence at all costs. You and class rep-chan were both targeted maliciously, but that doesn't apply to this crab."

"It doesn't?"

If there was a victim, didn't that imply malice, imply hostility?

"Like I said, we're dealing with a god. Gods are just there. They don't do anything. They simply exist. Just like you simply go home after school. It's her own fault this happened."

No harm. No assault.

No possession.

'Her own fault' was not the nicest way to put it, but Senjougahara said nothing. Either it made sense to her, or she had steeled herself to take whatever he might say, mindful of what we were about to do.

"So we won't be banishing it or kicking its ass, Araragi-kun. Put that kind of thing out of your mind. We are going to ask it for a favor. Ask for its mercy."

"Ask it...?"

"Yes."

"Will it agree to that? Will it just give Senjougahara her weight back?"

"Can't say for sure, but probably. Not like wandering by a shrine on New Year's, after all. They're not so indifferent they'd ignore an earnest entreaty. Gods are always looking at the big picture. Japanese gods are particularly out of it. They care about humanity as a whole, maybe, but as individuals? They don't really notice us. We don't matter at all. They can't tell me apart from you apart from Shinobu-chan. Age, gender, weight -- doesn't matter. We're all just 'human.' We're all the same thing."

The same thing.

Not just similar. The same.

"Hmm. Very different from curses."

"So," Senjougahara said, as if she'd been trying to work up the nerve to ask. "Is the crab...nearby?"

"Yeah. Nearby, near to everywhere. But to make it come here, we need to do some things."

We reached the third floor.

And went into one of the classrooms.

The entire room was covered in Shinto holy ropes. All the desks and chairs had been removed, and in front of the chalkboard was an altar. An offering placed on the stand. It didn't look like something hastily thrown together while we were gone. Lamps were lit in the corners, bathing the room in soft light.

"A barrier, basically. Makeshift holy ground. Nothing fancy. You can relax," he said, looking at Senjougahara.

"I am...relaxed."

"Good to hear." We stepped inside. "Both of you -- lower your gaze, and keep your head down."

"Eh?"

"You're before a god."

We all stood before the altar.

This was so different from how we'd dealt with mine, or with Hanekawa's. I was the one who wasn't relaxed. The air felt tense -- so tense it could drive a man mad.

I hunkered down.

Ready for anything.

I was not religious; like most people my age, I could barely tell the difference between Shinto and Buddhism, but there was a part of me, instinct or something similar, that reacted to times like this.

To this time.

And place.

"Um, Oshino..."

"What, Araragi-kun?"

"I was just thinking...given the situation and this whole space you've made...should I even be here? It just feels like I'm in the way."

"You won't be. I doubt there'll be any problems, but just in case there is... You gotta think about what might happen in a just-in-case scenario. That happens, you'll need to shield her."

"I will?"

"What else is that immortal body for?"

"....."

That certainly was a good line, but I was pretty sure that wasn't what it was for.

And I wasn't immortal any more.

"Araragi-kun," Senjougahara said. "You will protect me, won't you?"

"When did you become a princess!?"

"Oh, come on. You were planning on killing yourself tomorrow anyway."

"That didn't last long."

That was the sort of thing you wouldn't even say behind someone's back, but she'd just said it to my face. I might have to give some serious thought to figuring out what terrible sin I'd committed in a previous life to deserve such vicious spite.

"I'm not asking you to do it for free."

"What'll you give me?"

"You want a material reward? How shallow. I'm not exaggerating when I say that single question encompasses all your failings as a human being."

"...so what'll you do for me?"

"Let's see...I suppose I'll abandon my plan to spread a rumor that you're such a creep you tried to equip Nera with the slave clothes when you played Dragon Quest V."

"I never did!"

And she'd planned to tell everyone?

How heartless.

"It should have been obvious you couldn't put those on her. Even a monkey would know that. No, I suppose in your case it would be 'even a dog', right?"

"Hang on! You might be acting like you just said something terribly clever, but has there been a single description of me this entire time that suggested I resembled a dog in any way?"

"True," Senjougahara laughed. "It wouldn't be fair to the dog."

"....!!"

Even a cliche line like that could be devastating when used with such impeccable timing. This woman truly was a master insulter.

"Very well. Be a coward, run away with your tail between your legs. Go home and do what you always do: sit alone and pretend to be tasered."

"What kind of sick pastime is that!?"

How many malicious rumors was she planning to start?

"When you reach my level, the likes of you cannot hope to hide anything. I know all your deepest dullest secrets."

"You used the wrong word and somehow made it worse!? Are you blackmailing the universe!?"

I wouldn't put it past her.

I'd definitely rather have dark secrets than dull ones.

"Anyway, Oshino, instead of using me, you could use the vamp...Shinobu. Like we did with Hanekawa."

"Shinobu's already gone beddy bye," Oshino said.

"....."

A vampire that slept at night.

That was so sad.

Oshino took the offering of sake off the altar, and handed it to Senjougahara.

"Um...what do I...?" she stammered.

"Drinking alcohol decreases the distance between us and gods. It'll help you relax a little, anyway."

"...I'm underage."

"No need to drink that much. Just a sip."

"....."

She stared at him for a long moment, and then took a drink. He took the cup from her hands, and placed it back on the altar.

"Okay. First, let's calm ourselves."

Facing forwards...

His back to Senjougahara, Oshino spoke.

"We begin by being calm. Mood is important. If we create a proper space, the ritual itself is not a problem -- it all boils down to how you feel."

"How I feel...?"

"Relax. Let your guard down. This is your place. A place where you belong. Put your head down, close your eyes, and count. One. Two. Three."

Perhaps...

I didn't need to follow suit, but I chose to. I closed my eyes, and counted with her. As I did, I realized...

This was all to set the tone.

Oshino's clothes, the ropes, the altar, the shower -- all designed to put Senjougahara in the necessary frame of mind.

Hypnotic suggestion.

He was basically hypnotizing her.

Take away her self-consciousness, relax her guard, and convince her to trust him -- his approach was different, but he'd had to go through much the same process with me and with Hanekawa. Salvation was for those who believed -- in other words, the first step was to get Senjougahara to accept things.

Senjougahara herself had said...

She only half trusted him.

But...

That wasn't enough.

She needed more.

Trust was important.

This was what Oshino meant when he said he would not save her, but she would save herself.

I opened my eyes.

Looked around.

Torches.

Flickering in the corners.

Wind from the window.

The lights flickering, ready to vanish in the first strong gust.

But they did not.

"Are we calm?"

"Yes."

"Then time for some questions. Answer the questions I ask you. What's your name?"

"Senjougahara Hitagi."

"Your school?"

"Naoetsu High School."

"Your birthday?"

"July 7th."

His questions were pointless, their contents without meaning.

Question after question.

The pace never changing.

Oshino's back to her.

Senjougahara's eyes closed, her head down.

Her face turned towards the floor.

The room so quiet you could hear us breathing, almost hear our hearts beating.

"Your favorite writer?"

"Yumeno Kyusaku."

"A mistake you made as a child?"

"I don't want to answer that."

"An old song you like?"

"I don't listen to music."

"What did you think when you graduated elementary school?"

"I was just moving to a different school. Public school to public school."

"What was your first crush like?"

"I don't want to answer that."

"What was the most painful moment," Oshino said, his tone never changing, "in your life?"

"....."

Senjougahara failed to answer.

She did not refuse. She just fell silent. I could tell this was the only question that had mattered.

"What's wrong? The most painful thing you can remember."

"...my..."

Clearly, she could not stay silent.

She could not refuse to answer.

The mood did not allow it.

This space did not permit it.

She'd been led here to answer.

"My mother..."

"Your mother?"

"Joined a cult."

And a particularly bad one.

She told me earlier...

...how her mother emptied her bank account, took out loans, drove them into financial ruin. How even after the divorce, her father was working overtime every day, barely sleeping, trying to pay off those loans.

Was this her most painful memory?

Worse than losing her weight?

Of course.

Of course it was worse.

But...it...

It was...

"Is that all?"

"...all?"

"It's not very much. Japanese laws guarantee religious freedom. Freedom to believe what you want is a fundamental human right. Whatever your mother believes, whatever she worships, the only difference is methodology."

"....."

"In other words...it's not enough," Oshino insisted. "Tell me what happened."

"What hap...m-my mother...for me. She joined the cult, they tricked her..."

"What happened after your mother joined the cult?"

After.

Senjougahara bit her lip.

"S-she brought a man from the cult home with her."

"A man from the cult. What did he do?"

"A-a purification ritual, he said."

"Purification? Purifying what?"

"He said he...had to purify me." She could barely get the words out. "Th-then he assaulted me."

"Assaulted. Violently? Or...sexually?"

"...sexually. Th-that man..." Senjougahara forced herself to say it. "He tried to rape me."

"...I see," Oshino nodded.

The way Senjougahara...

...was so oddly protective of herself.

Trusted no one.

Was so defensive and so aggressive.

This explained all of it.

And why she'd reacted like that when she saw Oshino in those robes.

To her eyes, they must not have been that different from what the cult wore.

"Even though he was a priest."

"That's a Buddhist perspective. There are religions that allow murder, within the family. Beliefs are not universal. But you said 'tried' -- was he not successful?"

"I grabbed my cleats, and hit him."

"...brave."

"He started bleeding. Writhing in pain."

"And you were safe?"

"I was safe."

"Good."

"But my mother didn't help me."

She'd watched the whole thing.

Senjougahara's voice never wavered.

Never faltered.

"She yelled at me."

"Is that all?"

"No. Because I hurt that man...my mother..."

"...was penalized?" Oshino cut ahead of her.

Even I could have guessed the answer, but...it seemed to work on Senjougahara.

"Yes," she said, nodding solemnly.

"Her daughter hurt a church official. Not surprising."

"Right. That's why...all our money. Our home. Our property. All the loans. She destroyed our family. Completely ruined it, ruined everything, but she kept on destroying things. She still is."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"You must know."

"I'm sure...she's still with them."

"She still believes."

"She never learned. She feels no shame."

"That hurts?"

"It does."

"Why does it hurt? She's not your mother any more."

"I keep thinking. If I hadn't...if I hadn't fought back. Then...none of this would have happened."

Her family would still be together.

They'd never have been torn apart.

"Do you think that?"

"I do...think that."

"Really?"

"...I do."

"Then that...is what you think," Oshino said. "No matter how much it weighs, you have to carry that burden. You can't make others carry it for you."

"Make others...?"

"Keep your eyes steady. Open your eyes...and look."

And...

Oshino opened his eyes.

Senjougahara did the same.

Torches in the corners.

Their flames flickering.

Our shadows...

...our shadows wavering.

Wobbling.

Swirling.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Senjougahara screamed.

Her head was still lowered, barely; her eyes wide like she could not believe them. Her body trembled. Sweat poured down her face.

She was panicking.

Senjougahara was panicking.

"Do you...see something?" Oshino said.

"I do. It's the same...a giant crab. I see a crab."

"Okay. I don't see a thing," he said, turning around and looking at me. "Can you see it, Araragi-kun?"

"...no."

All I could see...

Were flickering lights.

And writhing shadows.

Almost the same as seeing nothing.

I could not make it out.

"I can't...see much of anything."

"See?" Oshino turned back to Senjougahara. "You don't really see a crab, do you?"

"I do. Clearly. I can see it."

"A trick of the mind."

"No. It's here."

"Okay. Then..."

He followed her gaze.

As if there was something there.

As if there was something there.

"Then there's something you need to say."

"Say...?"

Then...

She must not have been thinking.

It wasn't a conscious choice, I'm sure.

But Senjougahara raised her head.

I suppose...

This was all too much for her.

Just a mistake.

But the reason for it didn't matter.

Human reasons didn't matter.

The instant she looked up, Senjougahara went flying backwards.

She was flung backwards.

Like she weighed nothing at all, her feet never touching the ground, very fast. Until she slammed into the chalkboard at the far end of the room.

Slammed into it...

...and stayed there.

Not falling.

Pinned to the wall.

Crucified.

"S-Senjougahara!"

"Tch. I told you to shield her, Araragi-kun. You always did trip up when you were most needed. What are you standing there for?"

He looked disappointed. It had all happened in the blink of an eye, so I'm not sure I deserved it.

Senjougahara was plastered against the chalkboard as if gravity had changed direction.

Her body pressing into the wall.

Cracks had appeared on the wall around her.

Like she was being crushed against it.

She groaned, unable to scream.

In pain.

But I still couldn't see anything.

She was just plastered against the wall, held there by nothing. But she could see it.

The crab.

A giant crab.

The crab of burden.

"Oh well. Man, what a picky god. Hadn't even greeted the thing yet. What a nice guy. Did something good happen?"

"Uh...Oshino..."

"Yeah, yeah. Change of plans. No help for it. Either way works for me. Always did."

He sighed, and shuffled over to her.

Looking fed up.

Then he reached out...

...and grabbed the air a few inches from her face.

And yanked.

"Hokay," he muttered, and slammed whatever it was into the floor, hard, like a judo throw. There was no sound. No dust scattered. But he slammed it to the ground just as hard as it had Senjougahara -- maybe even harder. And without pausing for breath, he jumped on top of it.

Stomped on a god.

Violently.

Disrespectful and sacrilegious.

This pacifist was not in awe of any god.

"....."

From where I stood, it looked like Oshino was performing a mime routine. A particularly frenzied one. Currently he was standing on one leg, maintaining his balance perfectly. But to Senjougahara's eyes...

It must be quite a sight.

Her eyes had nearly popped out of her head.

Whatever was keeping her fixed to the wall must have let go, because she slid to the ground. It was not that far a fall, and she weighed next to nothing, so it would normally not have been much of an impact, but it took her completely by surprise, and she landed awkwardly.

"You okay?" Oshino called out, staring fixedly at his own feet.

His eyes narrowed, as if measuring the value of something.

"Crabs. No matter how big they are -- actually, the bigger the better -- once you flip them over, they're done for. Flat bodies were made to be stomped on, if you ask me. What do you say, Araragi-kun?" he asked. "We could start over. Would take time. Might be faster for me to just crush it."

"Crush it? Well...all she did was raise her head for a second."

"That's enough, though. More than enough. We're led by feelings, here. If we can't ask nicely, we've got to play a more dangerous game. Like we did with the demon and the cat. If words won't work, we have to fight. Same way governments work. If I crush it, well, her problem resolves. Technically. Can't recommend it; the root of the problem remains. Treating the symptoms. Like cutting a weed instead of digging it out. But maybe that's enough..."

"Maybe?"

"You see, Araragi-kun," Oshino said, grinning. "I really hate crabs."

Too hard to eat.

He leaned forward.

Putting his weight on it.

"Wait."

A voice behind him.

It belonged to Senjougahara.

Patting her grazed knees, she sat up.

"Wait. Please, Oshino-san."

"Wait?" he said, looking back at her.

His smile not fading.

"Wait for what?"

"I was just surprised," she said. "But I can do this. I can handle it."

"Hunh."

He did not take his foot away.

It kept the crab pinned down.

But he didn't crush it.

"Then go ahead."

And Senjougahara...

Did something I found extremely hard to believe. She knelt down, straightened up her back, put her hands on the floor, and slowly, with deep respect...bowed to the thing under Oshino's foot.

Her head nearly touched the floor.

Senjougahara Hitagi had voluntarily humbled herself before it.

Without anyone telling her to do so.

"I'm sorry."

First, she apologized.

"And...thank you."

Then, she expressed gratitude.

"But...it's gone on long enough. These are my feelings. My thoughts. My memories. I will take them back. I should never have lost them."

And finally...

"Please. Please. Give me back my weight. My burden."

Her last words were a prayer, a plea.

"Give my mother back to me."

With a thud, Oshino's foot hit the floor.

Not because he had stomped on it.

It was just not there any more.

As if it had never been there.

It was gone.

Oshino Meme said nothing. He just stood there.

Even though she knew it was gone, Senjougahara Hitagi did not sit up. She simply started crying. All Araragi Koyomi could do was watch.

And begin to wonder if Senjougahara really, really, really was a tsundere.

Hitagi Crab - 007

The time line.

I'd got the time line confused.

I'd assumed Senjougahara met the crab, lost her weight, and that led to her mother being crazy enough to join a cult. But it was the other way around; Senjougahara's mother had joined the cult long before Senjougahara encountered the crab, and it took her weight away.

I should have guessed.

While staplers and utility knives were things you might have lying around the house, cleats were definitely not. The moment she mentioned them, I should have realized that this had happened when she was still on the track team -- in junior high. By the time she started high school, and did not participate in PE, let alone track team, she would never have owned a pair of cleats.

Apparently her mother had first joined the cult when Senjougahara was in the fifth grade. Well before even Hanekawa knew her.

At the time, she'd been a frail kid.

Actually sick, not just believed to be.

She had something bad -- you'd know the name if I mentioned it. Her odds of surviving it were less than ten percent, and the doctors were ready to give up.

Things were so bad...

Senjougahara's mother needed some respite.

They took advantage of it.

Senjougahara's operation defied the odds -- a fact that most likely had nothing to do with the cult, although Oshino pointed out that we had no way of being sure. When I was at Senjougahara's house, if I had chosen to inspect her naked body closely, I might have noticed the faint operation scars on her back...but obviously, I had done no such thing.

And the way she'd faced me, and put her shirt on first...well, I guess I'd been wrong to suggest she was showing off her body.

She'd asked for my opinion.

At any rate, when Senjougahara's life was saved, her mother...sank even deeper into the cult's clutches.

Believing they had saved her daughter's life.

They had her hooked.

A classic pattern.

But the family stuck together. I knew nothing about the cult's actual practices or beliefs, but for the most part, they did not seem to upend their follower's lives. Her father earned enough, and they'd been rich to begin with, which helped; but as the years passed, her mother's beliefs deepened, and their hold on her increased.

They were a family in name only.

Senjougahara was no longer speaking to her mother.

When she was still in elementary school, they'd remained close, but things had grown increasingly strained after she entered junior high. From the way Hanekawa described her then, it was hard to imagine something like that eating at her.

Perhaps it created her.

Made her great.

Forced her to try and be as perfect as she could be.

To show her mother how perfect she could be, to prove she could be great without help from any cult.

Despite not talking to her.

She had not naturally been inclined towards sports.

Certainly not when she'd been sick.

She must have forced herself.

But her efforts had backfired.

Made things worse.

The better Senjougahara did, the more perfect she managed to be, the more convinced her mother was it was all the cult's influence.

And the final result...

In her third year of junior high.

With graduation looming just ahead.

She'd joined the cult for her daughter, but her priorities had grown so out of whack she offered up her daughter to one of the cult's leaders. Perhaps she even thought it was for her daughter's own good.

Senjougahara fought back.

The cleat's spikes drew blood on the leader's forehead.

And the result...

...destroyed their family.

Ruined them.

Everything was taken away from her.

Money, house, land. Huge loans were taken out.

The divorce was finalized last year, she said; she'd moved to that apartment with her father when she started high school. Everything was over before she graduated junior high.

Over.

And...

In the interval, the space between junior and senior high...

...she met the crab.

"A crab of burden (*omoshi kani*) actually means a god (*omoishi kami*) of," Oshino explained, "thoughts, feelings (*omoi*), and bonds (*shigarami*). You could say that losing your weight is like you're no longer really there. When something traumatic happens, people's minds seal away the memories -- you see it all the time in movies or TV. It basically works the same way; the god takes what's troubling you away."

In other words, when she met the crab...

She severed her bonds with her mother.

She stopped thinking about how her mother had offered her to the cult leader, how she had not saved her, how this had destroyed their family. She stopped wondering if she should have let it happen.

She set down her burden.

She lost what weighed her down.

She chose...

...to hide it.

She needed some respite.

"A simple trade. An even exchange. Crabs have all that armor, they're pretty tough, right? We think they are, anyway. Got a shell on the outside. Protect what really matters in that exoskeleton. Blowing bubbles. Can't eat them easily."

He really seemed to hate them.

Oshino could get oddly hung up on things.

"The kanji for crab is understanding over insect. Same understanding as in the word for dissection. Anything living in the water gets classified that way in kanji, but these ones have two big claws."

In the end...

Senjougahara lost her burden -- her weight and her feelings. She was freed from suffering, no longer tormented. She threw it all away.

And this...

...made things much easier.

It really had.

Without her burden, she had no real problems. But like the boy who sold his shadow, there was never a day that went by when Senjougahara did not regret it.

Not because she did not get along with other people.

Not because her life had few luxuries remaining.

Not because she no longer made friends.

Not because she'd lost everything.

Simply because she had lost her feelings.

Five con artists.

None of them had anything to do with her mother's religion, but like Oshino, she'd only half trusted them...but the fact that she trusted them at all shows how much she regretted it. The fact that she kept going to the hospital did as well.

All wrong.

I'd been wrong about everything.

Ever since she lost her weight, Senjougahara...

...had not given up on anything.

...had not tossed aside anything.

"She didn't do anything wrong. Just because something bad happens doesn't mean you have to face it. Facing it doesn't make you better. Running away is always a valid option. Especially with a mother that abandoned her in favor of her religion. Given the circumstances, recovering her burden won't change anything. Only difference is her burden weighs on her again. Her mother won't come home, and her family won't recover."

It changed nothing.

Oshino did not say this to mock, was not being sarcastic.

"A crab of burden takes your weight, takes your memories, takes your identity. But it isn't like vampires or the sex cat. She chose this fate, and it was granted to her. A fair exchange. The god was always with her. She never once lost anything. And yet..."

And yet...

Even then.

All the more.

Senjougahara Hitagi wanted it back.

Wanted it all back.

Everything she remembered about her mother.

Her memories, and the pain they caused her.

I could not really know what that meant, and I would probably never know, but like Oshino said, little would come of it. Her mother would not come back to them. Senjougahara would suffer more than ever.

It changed nothing.

"It does change something," Senjougahara said.

Her eyes red and swollen.

"It was not a complete waste. If nothing else, I've found a good friend."

"Who?"

"You."

I knew the answer. But I was taken aback by how simple, direct, and unembarrassed she was about it.

"Thank you, Araragi-kun. I am very grateful to you. I apologize for anything I've said or done. I'd be happy if you'd continue to be my friend."

Despite myself...

This unexpected sentiment sank deep into my heart.

We'd promised to eat crab together.

Winter seemed a long way away.

Hitagi Crab - 008

And the next day, the punch line.

My two sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, beat me awake as usual. My body felt sluggish. I forced myself out of bed. It seemed harder than usual. My muscles ached, like I had a fever. This wasn't like Hanekawa's incident; I hadn't done any grappling or running, so I hadn't done anything to strain my muscles, but each step hurt. I made it down the stairs, but nearly toppled down them instead. My mind was clear, and it wasn't flu season, so what was going on?

I thought about it, and an impossible idea tugged at my brain.

I took a turn into the bathroom.

And stepped onto the scale.

My weight was 55 kilo.

But what the scale displayed is 100 kilo.

"...Seriously?"

Like he'd said...

Gods are pretty out of it.

Mayoi Snail - 001

I happened to meet Hachikuji Mayoi on the fourteenth of May, and it was Sunday. Nationwide it was Mother's Day. No matter if you loved your mother or hated your mother, no matter if you are on good terms with her or on bad, as long as you're a Japanese citizen you are given equally the right to enjoy Mother's Day. Well, I suppose Mother's Day originates from the U.S.A. That probably should make you wonder if Christmas, Halloween, Valentine's etcetera go in the same line like that, too, but anyway, fourteenth of May was the day boasting top carnation expenditure recorded among the year's three hundred sixty five days, the day when all at the same time in families all over, "Shoulder Rub Coupon" and "Helping with Chores Coupon" were being used. Wait, I'm not sure whether that custom is still around or not, either way, it was fourteenth of May, dubbed Mother's Day of that year.

It was that day.

That day, 9am in the morning.

I was sitting on a bench of an unfamiliar park. Gazing like a fool upon a foolishly blue sky, without anything to do in particular, sitting on a bench in an unfamiliar park. Moreover, I didn't even care where this place was, all I knew was this was, a park.

Park 浪白, read the gate.

If you asked me whether that's spelled "Namishiro", or "Rouhaku", or something completely different, I wouldn't know. The origin of the name, well, again obviously, I wouldn't know. Of course nothing would change if I knew. Not like there's a problem with that. I've

come here without any fixed goal in mind, I just randomly moved where I felt like going, where my legs led me, riding a mountain bike, and ended up in that park, and that's all there was to it, okay?

There is a difference in visiting and arriving with this place.

But other than me, there probably isn't any difference.

My bike was parked at the parking lot near the front of the gate.

In the parking lot, being neglected, exposed to winds and rained on too much, you just couldn't be sure if it were bicycles or piles of rust, there were two such things there, and other than that no other bikes other than my mountain bike have been parked there. In cases like this a man would perceive deeply the vanity of riding one's mountain bike upon an asphalt-covered road, but, hey, that was a vanity you could perceive at any time, without it being a case like this.

The park was pretty broad.

However that being said, it was simplistic and poor as for equipped playgrounds, so it probably just felt that way. It only looked spacey. A swing in a corner and a cat's brow-sized sandbox was all; no see-saw, no jungle gym, not even a slide. To me, a high-schooler in his third year, this park place could have become a nostalgia-inspiring location, but, surely enough, I couldn't help feeling the opposite.

But, why was it so empty, probably because of that kind of reason. Maybe it was that sort of place where the playgrounds were deemed potentially traumatic for children and rendered safe so the equipment once installed was removed and so it was like that? Even so, my initial thoughts wouldn't have changed, but I think, speaking of that, swings definitely should be the most dangerous, but, anyway, this kind of thing is unrelated to me, towards the miracle that I have a

normal body without any deficiency, it's not like I never had such an experience.

I surely was pushing my luck a lot when I was a child.

That's what I thought, with a feeling different from nostalgia.

But.

The me on the fourteenth of May, from a month and a half ago since, I already had lost the body you could call normal-- the sentiment ingrained in my heart still couldn't quite catch up with the reality of that. Seriously, that wasn't something you get over in a few months. I was probably never going to.

But, I thought.

Even taking the scarceness of playgrounds into consideration, the park felt unduly lonely. Indeed, there's not a single person here but me. Today was supposed to be a Sunday all over the country. Of course the park lacked in playgrounds, but in such a broad place, kids could be playing baseball with a ball of rubber and a plastic bat, I think. Or, is it that grade-schoolers these days already don't play baseball, or the next-popular soccer?. Probably they're just playing video games at home--or busy attending cram school maybe? Or the neighbourhood children might spend the day for the sake of Mother's Day, being all good kids.

Either way, this Sunday park seemed like I was here alone, as though I was alone in the whole world--go pick any exaggeration at that extent, because it really seemed like I was the owner of the place. I felt like I was free to never go home again. Because it is just me, just one person here... hm. Wait, actually, there is one. Not just me. Cutting straight across the open space from my bench, in a corner of

the park, by the metal billboard with a map--the nearby residential area on it--there was a grade-schooler examining it. I can't tell what she is like just from her back. The impression she had was the large rucksack she wore. For a second I felt like I'd found a pal and my mind loosened vaguely, but, said grade-schooler, after spending some time staring at the map, seemed like she remembered something, and left the park behind. Then I became alone.

Not again, I thought.

...Onii-chan, you... I suddenly got reminded of my little sister's words.

The words tossed casually after me as I rode my mountain bike from home.

...Onii-chan, that's why you are...

Yeah.

Oh darn, I muttered as I changed my pose where I was looking up at the sky to another, where I was staring at one point on the ground, my head between my hands.

A dark mood comes flooding over me, much like a tidal wave.

I was looking up, pretty calm and and relaxed, and this time I feel petty and hate myself for that. Self-loathing is probably the right word--normally, I'm not the sort to brood, I'm not the sort whose head the word "anguish" ever crosses, but, ever so seldom, like on the fourteenth of May, yeah, on such eventful days I often come down to this condition for some reason. Special situations, unique settings. I'm really damn sensitive to those. I lose my relaxedness. I even feel like fleeing.

Sigh, normal days are the best.

Please let it be tomorrow.

So, from this rare condition--a snail-related episode began. Looking back at it, if I had not been like that, the whole episode might not have even started.

Mayoi Snail - 002

"Oh my, look at this! I thought somebody had left a dead dog lying on a park bench, and it was just you, Araragi-kun."

Feeling like I had just heard a greeting so novel it could as well have just become first ever endeavoured throughout the history of man, I raised my eyes from the ground to discover my classmate Senjougahara Hitagi there.

Obviously, as it was Sunday, she wasn't wearing her uniform. I'd thought I had something to say in regard to being called a dead dog right off, but as I saw her in plain clothes, and moreover, having that straight hair she would always leave hanging during school bound in a ponytail, that fresh visage of Senjougahara made me swallow my words that had been well on their way to my tongue and out.

Wow...

Definitely not so exposed, her breast was strangely emphasised in the upper part--and the culotte skirt of a length unthinkable for the usual school clothes. You couldn't even call that a skirt, and the black stockings were even more captivating than bare legs.

"What now? I just said hi. I was kidding. Don't make a seriously daunted face, if you please. Isn't your sense of humour positively lacking, Araragi-kun?"

"Ah, uh, well..."

"Or, what, was it that our naive Araragi-kun got fascinated by my so charming usual clothes and had his moment of felicity?"

"..."

Her expression was like after a bad pun, but anyway, as she hit the bull's eye, or anyhow really close to the truth of what I was feeling, I couldn't quite call up a good riposte.

"By the way, the 蕩 part of 'fascinated' is quite a word. Did you know? You write 'grass crown' over 'hot water'(湯). So inside me, in the bright sunshine(明) by the grass crown, the moe(萌) goes up a notch, shouldering the future generation itself which grass symbolises, a sensitive word like that that gathers expectations on me. You can also coin up pretties like maidinated, or cat-earcinated."

"...Your clothes have a really different impression from the usual, so I was surprised. That's all."

"Oh, that may be so. Back then I was wearing my milder clothes, you see."

"Really? Heh."

"That said, however, this set, top and bottom, is something I just bought yesterday. To celebrate my recovery partially."

"Recovery..."

Senjougahara Hitagi.

A girl from my class.

Until just recently, she had been dealing with a certain problem. That problem, until just recently--and ever since she entered high school.

For more than two years.

Incessantly.

Because of that problem she never made friends, she could touch nobody, she was leading a torturous school life not unlike being

locked in a prison cell--but, happily, the problem faced its basic solution last Monday. I took a part in solving it, too--me and Senjougahara have a long history of neighbouring desks in the same class throughout the first, the second, and this, third year, but that time was the first we actually talked. As well as the first time you can say a connection was born between me and her, who had seemed quiet and smart, so beautifully weak and frail and sickly.

The problem was solved.

Solved.

That said, looking from Senjougahara's perspective, the problem she had been walking along for years hadn't been all that simple, of course--it had been bad enough that Senjougahara has been skipping school until Saturday, yesterday. Apparently she spent that time in a hospital undergoing an examination or maybe a work-up.

Then yesterday.

She was freed from all that.

Apparently.

After all.

Or, on the contrary, at last.

Or, the other way, finally.

"Well, although I said so, the root of the problem is in no way fixed, so to me, it's a touchy matter whether to just let it go and be happy or not."

"The root of the problem--hm."

Yeah, her problem wasn't the sort that just gets solved.

But there aren't many phenomena you call problems out there which are the sort, it seems--because things end first, and the true face of what you call problems is how we interpret it later.

Same goes for Senjougahara's case.

Same goes for mine.

"Don't mind it. It's fine with just me brooding over it."

"Heh. Well, yeah."

That was true.

True, for both of us.

"Yes. Absolutely. Also, that means I am happy as much as I have the sanity to brood."

"...The way you said that implies there's somebody somewhere who's unhappy not even having the sanity to brood."

"Araragi-kun is stupid."

"So you said it directly!"

Ignoring the context completely, too.

So you just want to say I'm stupid by that...

It's been almost a week, yet there's no change in her.

Although she probably did gain some curve.

"But I'm glad," Senjougahara said with a faint smile. "I was just going to get accustomed to the clothes, but first of all I wanted you to see me wearing it."

"...Hmm?"

"Because solving my problem allowed me to choose my fashion freely, see. Now I can wear any clothes, whatever they may be, without a limit."

"Ah... Guess you can."

Unable to choose clothes.

That was one of Senjougahara's problems, as well.

At her age when she would want to look good.

"So you wanted to show off to me first, well, uhh, Providence is favourable... Anyway, really nice of you."

"It's not 'show off', Araragi-kun. I wanted you to see it. The nuance is completely different between those!"

"Really..."

Though, she was having me see more intense clothes than those "milder" on Monday... However, the clothes she was wearing now, with an exceeding emphasis on the breast, were thoroughly, surely, charming enough to actually keep my eyes firmly nailed in. Her taste was probably to blame that I felt attracted as though by a powerful magnet. She was giving herself out as a sickly girl, but, quite in opposition to those words, I couldn't deny a positive inclination in her. Since she'd tied her hair up, the upper body line became apparent. Especially around her breast--uh, why am I talking about her breast all the time... It's not even that exposed... or rather, considering the middle of May and her wearing a long-sleeve jacket and long stockings, quite underexposed, but, well, exotic. Why, what does that mean? Maybe the case of Senjougahara Hitagi which took place on Monday and then the case of the class rep, Hanekawa

Tsubasa which took place during the Golden Week have both empowered me to feel more eroticism in a dressed woman rather than naked or wearing lingerie...

That sucks...

I don't need that sort of power at the high school stage...

And thinking calmly, giving an eye like this to a classmate girl is a simple rudeness, in my opinion. It felt like I was hard at work embarrassing myself.

"By the way, Araragi-kun. Just what in the world are you doing here? Have you grown a habit of skipping classes while I was on my leave? And you can't talk to your parents about that, so you pretend you're attending, and really killing time in this park or something... If that is the case, it would feel like what I was fearing happened at last!"

"Sounds like I'm some downsized pops..."

And it's Sunday today.

Mother's Day, too.

That I had wanted to mention, but gave up just the moment before. Senjougahara lives with her father for certain reasons. As for her mother, she was in a hairy situation. It's probably worse to over-analyse my own words like this than not, but it's still not something I should mention freely, I guess. The words "Mother's Day" shall be taboo for Senjougahara from now on.

Neither did I--

Neither did I want to go deeper in that direction.

"Not really. Just killing time."

"A man who can answer 'killing time' when asked what he's doing isn't worth much as a rumour has it. Although, I would rather that notion had had no relation to Araragi-kun."

"...I'm touring around."

By bike, I added.

Senjougahara listened, nodded with a curious "hmm", and turned towards the park entrance. Right where the bike parking lot was.

"So, that bicycle was yours?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"It was so rusted you'd think it were iron oxide coating, its chain broken and in pieces, and there was no saddle nor the handle bar, it is a wonder a bicycle like that can still move."

"Not that one!"

That's the dumped bicycle.

"Aside from two bicycles like that, there was the cool one, right? The red one! That's mine!"

"Hm... Ahh. That mountain bike."

"Yeah, that."

"MTB."

"Heh. Yeah."

"MIB."

"No."

"Hmm. Oh, it's you, Araragi-kun! Anyway, it's weird then. Its build is quite different from what I rode with you, I think."

"That one's for school. Like I'd ride a granny bike out of hobby."

"That figures. Because you're a high-schooler..." Senjougahara nods, humming in agreement knowingly. "High school, mountain bikes."

"You're saying it like there's more to it..."

"High school, mountain bikes. Middle school, butterfly knives. Grade school, skirt-lifting."

"What is that ominous sequence supposed to mean!?"

"Without conjunctions or adjectives, you can't tell if it's ominous or not, can you? Don't yell baseless conclusions at a girl, Araragi-kun. Intimidation is a form of violence, you know that?"

And verbal abuse is not?

Which I won't say, though, because it'd be of no use...

"Okay, try adding conjunctions and adjectives."

"High school having mountain bikes is more improbable than middle school's butterfly knives or grade school's skirt-lifting."

"So you aren't going to keep on topic, are you!"

"Oh you, Araragi-kun! You were supposed to point out that "having" is neither a conjunction nor an adjective, but a verb in present participle tense, right?"

"Who'd tell that right off from what you washed me with!"

That's the school's top scorer for you.

Or is it actually just me not knowing...

Literature isn't my cup of tea.

"You know, lay off me. It's not even like I like mountain bikes so much, and it's too late anyhow, so I decided I'd be more patient about your verbal abuse. Or not patient, flexible. But there're 50,000 highschoolers riding mountain bikes all over the world, right? So you're willing to set them all against you?"

"The mountain bike is really great. A gem for every high-schooler to admire."

Senjougahara Hitagi in Turn Back on Old Times.

Uncharacteristically wise in self-protection.

"As the sort of greatness shown was not anything like Araragi-kun, I just ended up saying something ad lib."

"And shifted the responsibility..."

"Oh jeez, you like nitpicking, don't you? If you want to get murdered that much, I'll give you half of that any time."

"I'll claim cruel treatment!"

"Araragi-kun, do you come around here often?"

"You're sure quick to getting back to the track. Okay, no, it's the first time, I guess. I was just riding my bike, and there was a small park, so I was just taking a rest."

Frankly speaking, it felt farther away--I thought I had just legged on all the way to Okinawa, but the fact that I happened to bump into Senjougahara nonchalantly, obviously enough, means that just by bike, I can't even get out of the town I live in. Like a ranch cow.

Sigh.

Maybe I should get a licence.

But that's after graduating, eh.

"What about yourself? You mentioned getting accustomed, well, does that mean rehab walks?"

"I mentioned getting accustomed to my clothes. You, being a boy, probably don't do that? You still would walk around to get used to shoes, at least. Well, let's just call it going for a walk, yes."

"Heh."

"This place used to be my territory a long time ago."

"..."

Her territory...

"Ahh. That's right, you moved during the second year. So, you used to live around here before that?"

"Well, I did."

So she did.

Aha--that means it's not just a simple walk, nor just getting accustomed to clothes, but in actuality, as her problem has been solved, she was feeling nostalgic, too. So she could be humane, as well.

"It's been a while, though, and this place--"

"What? Did you mean to say, hasn't changed at all?"

"No, the opposite. It's changed completely," she instantly replied.

So her stroll must be over in a way.

"It isn't really like I would become sentimental on that much--yet, when it is your former home, and it changes, you just feel your motivation abate for no reason in particular."

"Can't change, don't bother, right?"

I've been growing up around the same place all the time, though, so, frankly, I couldn't feel for her at all. And I don't have what they call "home town" someplace country, either...

"True. You can't change it," without a fitting rebuke, which wasn't like her, Senjougahara said. It's seldom that she wouldn't backlash on anything like a personal opinion. Or, she could have thought that talking to me about it would solve nothing.

"Say, Araragi-kun. As it's come to this, would you mind me over there?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

"..."

The way she said that was really frank.

Her intentions, simple and clear.

Direct, right to the point.

"Sure. I've occupied a four-person bench alone, so I was beginning to feel guilty somewhat."

"Oh. Then I'll do that."

So said Senjougahara as she sat beside me.

About as close as our shoulders touched.

"..."

Ehh... Why would she, on a bench for four, sit as if it's for two...? That's a bit too intimate, Senjougahara-san. Just at the brink of, well, two bodies touching, not quite, but any minute gesture would

suffice--this really fine balance is, us being classmates, or rather even friends, just a tad bit really minutely fine, it seemed. Still, if I were to try and distance myself away now, it could leave the impression as though I were avoiding Senjougahara. Should she have thought about it that way, even though I wouldn't have meant that, just thinking of what persecution Senjougahara would unleash on myself was easily enough for me, for one, to not move a muscle. As a result--I froze in place.

"It's about the recent events."

In a situation like this, in communicating positions like this.

Senjougahara said in a level tone.

"I thought I should once again say thanks."

"...Oh. It's nothing, really, I don't mind. Thinking back, I haven't served any purpose there."

"True. You haven't even served as garbage."

"..."

It tecnhically was the same thing, but the expression was crueler.

Actually, this woman is cruel.

"Then go say thanks to Oshino. I think that'll do."

"Oshino-san is a different story. That and Oshino-san provided that I am to pay him for work. 100,000 yen, was it?"

"Yeah. You were going to part-time?"

"I was. That said, however, my personality isn't good for labouring, so I'm still at the stage of taking measures to work around that."

"Being aware of yourself is a better thing than not."

"It's not something I could just trample over..."

"So you were working around that."

"I was kidding you. I'm serious about money. Well, this makes Oshino-san stand apart from this--there you go. Now, I would like you, Araragi-kun, in a way different from Oshino-san's, to accept my gratitude."

"Well, you've essentially said it, so enough about me. 'Cause if you keep repeating words, no matter how sincere, their meaning decreases."

"Oh, I didn't mean it from the start."

"So you didn't!?"

"Just kidding. I did mean it."

"You're chock full of jokes, huh?"

I was chock full of frustration.

Ahem, Senjougahara cleared her throat.

"I'm so sorry. It's just, whenever you tell me anything, I just can't help rebuking it, wanting to cross it."

"..."

What's the point in adding that after an "I'm sorry"?...

I just felt like she said, "We're incompatible."

"I'm sure it's, well, you know? You're likely to bully somebody you're keen on. It might be that kind of a childish mental state."

"Nah, more like you're likely to torment somebody weak, that kind of a big adult's mental state..."

Hm?

Did Senjougahara just call me somebody she's keen on?

Ah, no, that's a figure of speech...

Thinking that every girl that smiles at you is also into you, like a middle schooler would, isn't really sensible (smiles are free), so I get back to the topic.

"Well, actually, I don't even think anyone did anything for you that'd make you feel this obliged, and, as Oshino would say, you 'just saved yourself alone', so to me, all the obligations and what not aren't worth mentioning. They just complicate relationships in the long run."

"Relationships..." Senjougahara repeated in the absolutely same intonations. "I-- Araragi-kun. Does that mean I may think of you as someone close?"

"Huh? Sure."

We're as good as those each with a problem that they had faced and revealed to each other. This isn't the stage of "unrelated" any more, much less "just classmates" by now, I guess.

"Oh... Yes, we're as good as those who learned each other's weaknesses."

"Eh?... Our relationship had that tension?"

That's got to get cold...

"Just think it's not about weaknesses, but that we just naturally got closer... That would be right, no? Then I'll do the same."

"But Araragi-kun, you don't seem the type to have many friends."

"That used to be true up to the last year. Types aside, that was my motto. I just happened to have a paradigm shift during spring break... And you?"

"For me it used to be until last Monday."

So Senjougahara says.

"If you want more--until I met Araragi-kun."

"..."

What's up with her...

Actually, what's up with this situation...

It's just like Senjougahara's about to confess to me... It's too hard to breathe, too meaningful a silence, well... I feel like I'm not braced for it. Had I known things would come to this, I would have picked better clothes, combed my hair...

No, wait!

Agh, now I'm awfully embarrassed of myself, beginning to seriously think of getting confessed to! Also, as I was thinking about that, why have my eyes ended up on Senjougahara's breast!? Was I this predictable!? Was Araragi Koyomi a man so shallow as to make decisions about a girl based on her looks (her breasts)?...

"What's wrong, Araragi-kun?"

"Uh, um... I'm really sorry."

"About what?"

"My thoughts made me realise my existence was a sin..."

"I see. A sinful bastard, are you?"

"..."

Na.

Once again, it meant the same but had the wrong nuance.

"In short, Araragi-kun..." Senjougahara said, "whatever you say, I think I'd like to pay returns to you. Otherwise, I think I'll always be feeling something like a weakness with you. If we want to improve our relationship, it's after we're through that and capable of being friends on equal terms."

"Friends..."

Friends.

Why...

It's supposedly a touching idea, no matter how you look at it, yet, as I had excess expectations, I feel down inside, how do I put this--it's like something was disappointed inside me...

No, that's not quite it...

That's really not the case...

"What is it, now, Araragi-kun? I'm sure I said something rather cool for myself, yet your expression is despaired."

"It's not, it's not. Upon having learned you were thinking that way I feel like dancing a French cancan which I'm desperately trying to suppress, so it may look diametric."

"Oh."

She nodded, apparently satisfied.

She probably thought I had ulterior motives.

"Well then. Either way--Araragi-kun. Is there anything you want me to do? I'll do any one thing you tell me to."

"A-any?"

"Any."

"Right..."

A girl of the same age just told me she'd do anything for me.

It felt like reaching an unexpected achievement.

...

But I'm adamant she knows what she's saying.

"I'm serious, anything. Whatever you wish--I'll grant it for you. World domination, eternal life, wish to defeat Saiyans soon to come on Earth, whatever."

"Does that mean you've got more power than Shén Lóng!?"

"Sure does."

She affirmed it.

"I would rather you didn't think I would at such a dire moment not only turn out useless, but even turn to the enemy side. ...Well, yes, I would prefer a more individual wish, true. Something simpler."

"Figures..."

"Are you, naturally as it is, confused by me suddenly saying that? Then, you could go with the usual, as well. In this situation, there are a few oft-used standard wishes. Like, 'I wish you grant me a hundred wishes'."

"Eh? Does that work? Are you all right with it?"

In this situation, the oft-used standard wish would be about doing something shameless and very tabooish, no?

And she said that herself.

That's just asking for it.

"Just tell me anything. I'd like you to have me do something as long as I can. Like keep ending sentences with "-nyu" for a week, or attend school wearing no underwear for a week, or follow an enema diet for a week, I'm sure you have your preferences."

"Damn, what's that level of maniacal fetishism to assume of me!? I'm forgiving, but that's just too rude!"

"Ah... no, I'm really sorry, but I don't think I could keep up for my whole life..."

"It's the other way! I'm not angry because you underestimated the level of my mania!"

"Oh, really."

Senjougahara's face was that of a Buddha.

She's got me completely around her finger...

"Actually, Senjougahara, you sure you would swallow stupid desires like those?..."

"I'm that resolved."

"..."

That's a resolve you'd do better without.

"As part of brainstorm, I'd personally recommend having me wake you up while wearing nothing but an apron every day. I'm good at getting up early, too, actually, it's long my habit. Heck, I could cook you a breakfast while I'm at it, too. While wearing just an apron, of course. Isn't it the very man's spirit to enjoy the sight from behind?"

"Don't toss expensive words like 'man's spirit' around like that! Man's spirit is greater, cooler than that! And, if done in a family environment, that's going to ruin said family at the maximum instantaneous wind speed!"

"Sounds like you wouldn't mind if not for the family. Well, care to try living at my place for a week? Although it's effectively the same thing, I suppose."

"Listen, Senjougahara." I finally mustered up the will to have her do something. "Even if that kind of negotiation were to reach conclusion, I don't think our friendship would be possible afterwards."

"Ah. That is true, now that you mention it. Yes, that's right. Let us cross out the sexual content."

Okay, fair enough.

Wait, was having her say "-nyu" sexual for Senjougahara?... She's sure got pretty special tastes for her deadpan style, there.

"But I did not think you would have wishes of sexual content, either way."

"Oh, that's a serious trust."

"Because you're a virgin."

"..."

We've had that discussion before, have we not?

Oh yeah, last week.

"Virgins are good to deal with because they aren't too greedy."

"Uh... Senjougahara. Wait a second there. You have been saying every sort of thing about my virginity like that, but aren't you without any particular experience, either? The way you still say it I'm not, uh, impressed..."

"Oh please. I do have experience."

"Oh, really?"

"Heaps of it."

So Senjougahara said without twitching a brow.

She... really likes rebuking anything I say, regardless...

That "heaps of it" expression included.

"You know what... I'm not sure how to put it, but what if, just let's assume for a second that you really did, then what good is there in it for you to be telling me that fact?"

"...Hmm."

Blushed.

Was what I did, though, not Senjougahara.

I've so had enough of this conversation.

"Okay... Here's your correction," Senjougahara soon said. "I have, no experience. I'm a virgin."

"...Sigh."

A confession being such, it still was one load of a confession.

Then again, she forced me to say it right out, too, so that's a fair deal.

"Which means!" Senjougahara firmly rambles on, sticking her index finger out at me, yelling out at me in a strong voice almost echoing

within the park. "Nobody would talk to an uncool virgin freak like Araragi-kun, but a late-to-get-married mentally unstable virgin such as myself!"

"...!"

She... regards abusing me so highly she's ready to disparage herself...

In a way, she has my hat off before her; in a way, she has my white flag out.

All-fronts capitulation.

Well, with Senjougahara's high morals and rigorous demeanour, the last week's events must have left her feeling so keenly hurt it could become traumatic; thus, in this case of all, it's wiser not to dig in too deep; because for her, this could have by now become less of a personality and more of a pathology.

"But we digress," Senjougahara said to me, back with her calm voice. "Really, isn't there anything, Araragi-kun? Something simple, like helping you out with something."

"Helping me out--hmm."

"I'm a poor talker, and I can't really phrase it, but believe me, I want to be of use to you."

No, I don't think you're a poor talker.

I even think you're blabbering too much--but hey, Senjougahara Hitagi...

Doesn't--seem inherently bad.

And those needlessly crossed-out wishes, well.

This isn't the situation to wickedly and triflingly come up with filthy wishes.

"Or like telling you how to stop being a recluse."

"I'm not shutting myself away. In what world do recluses have freakin' mountain bikes?"

"You don't know for sure that no recluse has one, do you. Just because somebody is a recluse, you still can't impose your prejudices on him, Araragi-kun. He may take the wheels off and pedal all the time indoors."

"As in an aerobic bike?"

That is a healthy shut-away.

Provided he exists.

"But I can't instantly think of anything I'm having troubles with."

"That might be true. Your hair doesn't look like you just woke up today."

"Does that mean the worst of my worries would be a curl in my hair!?"

"Don't over-analyse. Your guilty conscience is surprisingly strong... Araragi-kun, there isn't that much written between these lines, you know?"

"How else am I supposed to interpret that..."

Darn.

She is like a rose, whose very petals have thorns.

"I think I could also help with problems like that girl who's kind to everyone in class but yourself."

"So cruel!"

As long as I don't tell her to do something, even against my will, this development of events threatens to last for all eternity.

Sigh...

I've had quite enough.

"Alright... My trouble, eh... Well, I won't vow this is something that really bothers me, mind you."

"Oh. There was something!"

"Everybody has something."

"I'm listening, what is it?"

"You look decisive."

"Well duh! This is the brink of whether I can return the favour to you or not. Or is it something hard to mention to others?"

"No, it's not..."

"Then say it! Talking about it makes it easier on you--or so they say."

...

You, formerly the most secretive person I've met, saying so doesn't really add to the verity of that.

"I, uh... had a fight with my sister."

"...Doesn't sound like I could help."

There you got a woman real quick to give up.

I just started, damn it...

"But finish the story, just in case."

"In case!..."

"Then, finish the story the first thing."

"That's about the same thing."

"Thing is, the thing with first things is, any first thing you say goes first."

"..... Ahh, okay, yeah."

I just swore to never say that.

But, well, not with where we were going.

"You know, it's Mother's Day today."

"Hm? Oh, indeed it was." Senjougahara nodded in a common manner.

I guess I was worrying too much about her.

Meaning that the rest is--my problem.

"So, which sister did you have a fight with? I reckon you had two, right?"

"Yeah, so you knew? More with the older one--but really, it was, like, both. Whatever, wherever, when-, why and however they do it, they do it together, perfectly snug."

"They're the Two Fire Sisters of Tsuga Tree, after all."

"You even know their nickname..."

I don't like that for some reason.

Though I like my sisters having a popular nickname even less.

"Both of them stick to Mum as well--so she treats them as kittens, pets them and all. So--"

"I see," Senjougahara interrupts me, as if to show she has reached full consent. She wouldn't wait for me to finish speaking, almost not wanting to hear too much. "The dull first son, on today being the very Mother's Day, is out-of-place in his own home."

"...That about covers it."

With the dull first son part being supposedly usual abusive rambling for Senjougahara, but also being a non-hyperbolic non-anything fact, I couldn't help but admit it.

Not to mention being out-of-place.

I did feel uncomfortable there.

"And so, you've been touring this far off. Heh. Still, I don't understand. How did that turn into a fight with your sisters?"

"Back early in the morning, I was sneaking out, and when I saddled the bike, my sisters caught me. An argument ensued."

"An argument?"

"Apparently they wanted to celebrate Mother's Day with me, but--well, look, I just can't help it, so there."

"You can't, huh. So there, eh."

Senjougahara repeated after me meaningfully.

Or she wanted me to think again.

Just how much luxury my troubles were.

Given Senjougahara's father-and-kid family--it was probably that.

"It often happens that a middle school girl would hate her father--would a boy not be able to bear being with his mother in the same way?"

"Sigh... No, not that I can't bear being around her, nor do I hate her, but it feels, uh, awkward, well, since I have younger sisters, they're the same, mostly--"

That's what being the older brother means.

That's why every time things go the way they do--

"...But eh, Senjougahara. That's not the problem. Fights with sisters, Mother's Day and all are fine with me per se--not just today, it happens every event-ish day, somehow. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Look. I could mention a lot of things, like I can't go celebrate just one Mother's Day, or that I get all-out angry at what my sisters four years younger than me tell me, all that stuff is, well, things showing how petty a human I am, no matter how that pisses me off, there's no helping it."

"Heh--that's a complex trouble," Senjougahara says. "You go all around, and your trouble goes meta. Something like the goose and egg problem."

"The egg was first, by the way."

"Oh, really?"

"It's not complex, just miniature. Like, alas, I'm a petty human! But, still, when I think I'd have to apologise to my younger sisters, I suddenly really don't care about going home. Feels like I could just live in this park forever."

"So you don't care about going home--hm." Senjougahara sighed. "Regrettably, doing something about your pettiness as a human is outside my ability..."

"..."

Yeah, she stated the obvious, but her directness and her chagrin voice made me feel down even more. Well, it's not so deep as to count as feeling down, but the very amount of lacking deepness of what I felt had a bad side of its own.

"Or, 'I'm so boring'. I want to worry about world peace, or how to keep everyone happy, if I am to worry at all. But here it is, my worry, tiny like this. That's--what I hate."

"Tiny--"

"Or you could say 'shabby'. It's like, uh, taking a fortune cookie and getting 'slightly good luck' all the time, that sort of shabbiness."

"You shouldn't deny your own charm, Araragi-kun."

"My what!? You mean my charm was getting 'slightly good luck' all the time!?"

"I'm kidding. And, your shabbiness isn't like getting 'slightly good luck' all the time."

"Let me guess, you'll tell me it's like getting 'greater bad luck'."

"Oh, no. That would be something awful...ly nice. Araragi-kun's shabbiness is all about..." Senjougahara held a pause to add weight to what she was going to say, then continued. "...When you get a 'great luck', but read the small text and find out the contents aren't that lucky. That's more like it."

I masticated and ruminated upon the idea thoroughly.

"Damn shabby!" I yelled.

I've never even heard of such shabby people... And if I might add, she made it up too well... One thing after another--or rather, one rebuttal after another, this woman was all the more ominous.

"But disregarding your mother, the fight with your sisters may actually be minor. Although, Araragi-kun, you're supposed to love and pamper little sisters."

"It's fights through and through."

Even among those--today's one may fit.

But today it wasn't the usual.

"So they're uncute no matter how you look, disturbing little sisters?"

"My sisters aren't disturbing at all!"

"Or it could be the reversal of love. You, Araragi-kun, are surprisingly into your sisters, I presume."

"No. Little sister-loving is a wild fancy of those who have none. That's absolutely impossible in real life."

"Oh! You, who have them, sound so condescending to those who don't, which attitude doesn't amuse me, Araragi-kun."

...

Just what does she mean?...

"People who say stuff like, "Money is not a problem~", or, "I'd rather not have a girlfriend~", or, "Your academic background doesn't matter~"... these haughty people. Ew."

"Little sisters don't fall into that sort of stuff..."

"So. You don't feel unbrotherly love to them. You wouldn't fall in love with your actual little sisters."

"Who would?"

"True. You seem like a sororate type."

Solo rate?

No, I don't think that's it.

"I mean the sororate marriage. The opposite to levirate marriage, that is to say, should your wife die, you would marry her sister."

"...An erudite as usual, you keep earning my admiration, except why do I have to be that sororate or whatever?"

"In your case, you'll first have the daughter of a non-blood-related woman call you "Oniichan", then marry the daughter... so she'll keep calling you "Oniichan" even after your marriage, which is truly the very real, original-meaning--"

"That sounds like I'll kill my first wife!"

The "straight man" comical part wasn't given to me originally, but Senjougahara's phrase just made me react before she could finish it.

"So, sororate Araragi-kun--"

"Please, I beg you, just call me a sister-lover!"

"Well, you said you wouldn't fall in love with your actual sister."

"Not that I would fall in love with my sister-in-law, either!"

"Then, you might fall in love with your lover-in-law."

"I just said... Wha? What law handles lovers?"

What was that?

No, calling a couple "-in-law" would, on the second thought, seem to fit, as "in-law" means duty, obligation; but what are the real lovers called, then?... And we so digressed...

"You are tiny indeed, becoming dumbfounded at a low-level crack."

"What you're talking about is not low-level."

"Right now I was just testing you."

"Testing me for what... or, did that mean you've just been playing the whole time!?"

"If I were going for real, I'd have transformed."

"Transformed!? Damn, I want to see that!"

No, I'm not even sure I do...

Senjougahara sighed, looking pensive.

"You overreact big-time, but you're tiny as a human... What if that's karma-related? But, however petty a human you may be, I will not sweep you away. I'll be there for your human-pettiness."

"That was another weird expression."

"I'll be there for you no matter what. From western peaks to eastern seas, I'll be your solace in Hell itself should you desire."

"...Right, you know, you may sound cool saying such phrases, just..."

"So, beside things related to your human sizes, is there anything troubling you?"

"..."

What if she hates me?

What if I'm getting severely bullied right now?

I'd like it to be just a persecution complex...

"Still nothing comes to mind..."

"Nothing you want and nothing you're having problems with--hmm..."

"What abuse do I get to be showered in this time?"

"You're a big guy, that's great."

"That's a forced praise, don't."

"You're exorbitantly great, Araragi-kun."

"No forced pra... Er, come again? Eggs or beat antler?"

"It's a hyperbole to "great". You didn't know?"

"I didn't... And why are you dragging expensive words around like this just to praise me, what are you scheming?"

And she said I was a big guy, of all things... And while we've just talked I was a petty human.

"Nothing, I just thought you might wish that I stopped my verbal abuse for a week, so thought I'd practice ahead."

"I don't think you could, either way."

That would have been on par with telling you not to breathe, to stop your heartbeat.

And if we suppose she would stop talking abuse for a week, that would no more be the Senjougahara I know, and it won't be fun for me as well--wait, why does it look like I'm becoming unable to part with Senjougahara's poison now?

That was close...

"Okay, okay... By the way, it's amazing how you exclude sexual content and instantly run out of ideas."

"That's true, except I had had no ideas before that restriction, either."

"Very well, Araragi-kun. Let's say it can be just a little bit sexual. By name of Senjougahara Hitagi, I shall agree to unseal thy desire."

"..."

Am I expected to do something, perchance?

Ahh, hyper-self-consciousness this time... That's swaying.

"Are you sure there isn't anything? Like helping you study."

"I've given up on it by now. As long as I can graduate."

"So, you want to graduate?"

"*I'm sure I'll do it normally!*"

"So, you want to do it normally?"

"You're just asking for it."

"So, let's see--"

Senjougahara holds a seemingly timed pause, then chooses a good moment, and says:

"Do you want a woman?"

"..."

Is this--still hyper-self-consciousness?

That ought to be meaningful, that.

"What if I said 'yes'?.. What would happen?"

"You'd find a girlfriend," Senjougahara says with a poker face. "That's all."

"..."

Yeah...

Though, if I think of the deeper sense of that, it's a valid phrase.

Just what the hell kind of situation is this, I really can't tell--but whatever I pick, never mind the progress, having somebody obliged to myself do it is, after all, not right. I don't mean anything ethical or moral, it just doesn't feel right.

Lovers-in-law--is what we aren't, either, though.

I somehow felt I understood what Oshino once said.

Save yourself...

From Oshino's stand, what I did was--be it for Senjougahara or for our class rep, or for that spring break woman...that vampire, it seemed pretty but it wasn't right.

Because Senjougahara's problem got solved because of nobody else but Senjougahara, her own sincere feelings.

In that sense--it really wouldn't be pretty.

Whoever I would rely on.

"No, nothing like that, really."

"Hmm. Okay."

Ultimately, whether there was a deeper meaning or not, and if there was, which sort of meaning it was, all became unclear now--but Senjougahara just said that, never showing a sign of anything having happened.

"Okay, just buy me juice or something this time. Then we'll call it even."

"Oh. Unselfish, are we."

You are really a big guy, Senjougahara adds in a concluding way.

Expressing her will to end the topic there.

Thus.

I turned my head up front. I felt I've spent quite a lot of time seeing Senjougahara's face, so it was intentional, or maybe I was averting my eyes out of discomfort, so I just looked before me--where.

Where, a girl was.

A girl carrying a huge rucksack.

Mayoi Snail – 003

The girl looked around nine or ten, standing in a corner of the park, by the metal billboard with a map--the nearby residential area on it, facing it. There she stares away from me, so I can't tell what she looks like, but her large rucksack was pretty impressive--so, I could remember. Indeed, this very girl had been looking at that neighbourhood layout even before Senjougahara got here. Back then she left soon--well, it seemed like she was back again. Seemingly comparing the board with something like a note in her hand.

Hmm.

I guess she is lost. I'm sure her note has a hand-drawn map or an address written on it.

I look at her rucksack.

There is a sewn-on name sign on it--"5-3, 八九寺真宵", denoted in fat marker strokes.

真宵, "early" "twilight"... should read, "Mayoi"(sounds like "hesitation", "lost").

But 八九寺... How do you read a surname like this? "Yakudera"... or not?

I suck at this language.

I think I'll ask somebody fluent.

"Hey, Senjougahara. Look, by that billboard, there's a grade-schooler, right? How do you read the surname on her rucksack name sign?"

"What?" Senjougahara said slowly. "I can't see that."

"Oh..."

True.

I just forgot.

My body is no longer normal--and yesterday, on Saturday, I let Shinobu drink my blood. Even though it's not as bad as it used to be during the spring break, right now I've got remarkably high capabilities. My vision wasn't an exception. If I forget the borderline just a little--I can see stuff across impossible distances and not notice. That by itself not a problem, but being able to see what nobody around can--doesn't feel particularly right.

A discord with the surroundings.

Though, that was Senjougahara's worry as well.

"Er... well, the kanji read 8, 9, and shrine..."

"...? Well, that would be Hachikuji."

"Hachikuji?"

"Yes. Can't you read kanji compounds of that level, Araragi-kun? I'm amazed you've graduated out of kindergarten."

"You can graduate from that blindfolded!"

"You're overpricing yourself too much, I have to say."

"Finding faults in a corrective rebuttal!?"

"I am not amused by conceit."

"Now I'm amused by you..."

"Seriously, Araragi-kun, if you just had a bit of interest in history or classic books, that is, if you were a man of intellectual curiosity, you

would have known. In your case, I feel it's a shame for life, no matter if you ask someone or not."

"Sure, sure. So I have no education."

"If you think being aware of yourself is a better thing than not, you're making a big mistake."

"..."

I think I have done a bad thing to her.

Because she was supposedly talking how she wanted to pay me back, but...

"Oh you... Okay. Anyway. So that reads Hachikuji Mayoi... Heh."

That's a strange name.

Well, that said, it may be more normal than "Senjougahara Hitagi" or "Araragi Koyomi". Anyhow, it's rather improper dissing people's names.

"Um..." I steal a look at Senjougahara.

Hm-m.

No matter how you think of it, she's not the type to melt in front of kids... I can imagine a ball coming rolling, and her just tossing it in the opposite direction, though. Or kicking a crying kid away because it's being noisy.

And so, it's easier to just go alone.

Or if it wasn't Senjougahara but somebody else, it could have been better for the child's wariness if I went up together with a girl.

Oh well.

"Hey, could you wait a bit here?"

"Sure, but, Araragi-kun, where are you going?"

"To talk to the grade-schooler."

"Don't. You would only end up hurt."

"..."

Seriously, she says the worst things like it's nothing.

No, I'll tell her off later.

Now, the kid.

Hachikuji Mayoi.

Off the bench, I go to across the park area--to where the map stands, and where the rucksack girl is, in a quick pace. The girl is so desperately busy checking her note against the map, she doesn't even notice me coming up behind her.

Leaving a step of distance between us, I call her up.

As friendly and cheerfully as possible.

"Hey. What's up, did you get lost?"

The girl turned around.

Her hairdo was twin tails and a short forelock, leaving brows visible.

The girl's features implied intelligence.

The girl--Hachikuji Mayoi gave me a long, exploring stare, then opened her mouth.

"Don't talk to me, please. I hate you."

"..."

...

I got back to the bench, shambling like a zombie.

Senjougahara looks curious.

"Well? What happened?"

"That hurt... I just ended up hurt..."

I took more damage than I would have thought.

Tens seconds before I've recovered.

"...I'll go once more."

"But what for, whence?"

"Obviously enough," I said.

And, to the rematch.

This Hachikuji girl was once again looking at the billboard, and it felt like our sudden encounter had never happened. Apparently comparing it with her note. I try looking over her shoulder--so it wasn't a map, but an address. I'm not local so I can't recognise it, but, well, it is around here.

"Hey, you."

"..."

"You're lost, aren't you? Where do you want to get to?"

"..."

"Let me see that note of yours for a moment."

"..."

"..."

...

I shambled back to the bench like a zombie.

Senjougahara looks curious.

"Well? What happened?"

"She ignored me... A grade school girl just didn't care..."

I took more damage than I would have thought.

Tens seconds before I've recovered.

"This time...I'll go do it."

"Araragi-kun, I'm not even sure what you want to do, or what you are doing..."

"Never mind..." I said.

And, on to another rematch.

This Hachikuji girl is facing the billboard.

The first strike decides the battle, eh. I slapped the back of her head. Apparently Hachikuji really hadn't seen that coming, because as a result, she hit the billboard full-force with her open forehead.

"W,what are you doing!!"

You turned to me.

Thanks.

"Anyone would when they're hit from behind!!"

"Uh... Yeah, sorry about that." My feelings have changed due to repeating shocks. "But you know? In the "life"(命) kanji, "hit"(叩) kanji is a part."

"What are you getting at!?"

"Life especially shines up after you get hit."

"I felt very sparky!"

"Yeah..."

I couldn't brush it off.

Too bad.

"Just that you looked troubled, and I thought I'd be able to help."

"Somebody who hits a little girl's head out of the blue and then gets to help her does not exist in this world!! Absolutely none!!"

She was really cautious now.

Can't blame her, though.

"Ugh, so I'm sorry. I'm apologising for real! Eh, I'm Araragi Koyomi."

"Oh, Koyomi. Oh, that's a girly name."

"..."

Way to go.

I don't get usually told that on the first meeting.

"You smell woman!! Please don't come near me!!"

"Can't let that pass from a woman, even so little, telling me that..."

Wait, wait.

Calm down, calm down.

Trust comes first--right?

Gotta soften the air a bit, or there won't be a talk.

"So, what's your name?"

"I am Hachikuji Mayoi. My name is Hachikuji Mayoi. It's a Mum and Dad-given name which is very dear to me."

"Aha..."

Apparently, the reading was correct, but...

"Anyway, please don't talk to me! I hate you!!"

"Why is that?"

"Because you hit me from behind!"

"You already said you hated me before getting hit."

"In that case, it's karma from the previous life!!"

"That's a fresh way of being hated."

"We've been sworn enemies in our preexistence!! I was a glorious princess, and you were the evil lord!!"

"You're getting carried off alone."

Do not follow strangers.

Ignore strangers trying to talk to you.

The times aren't pretty, and kids get such teachings drilled in down to the bone... Or maybe it means that my looks simply aren't the sort a kid would like.

Either way, it's depressing when a child hates you.

"Let's just calm down. I'm not meaning you harm. I just live in this city, and I'm man or beast-friendly like no one else here, you know?"

Okay, that was too much to say, but to deal with her, that should be the right level of exaggeration. The best plan with kids or not is having people think you're easy to deal with. Whether Hachikuji has been convinced or not, she hummed in a way very fitting to her, then said, "All right," and added, "I won't be that suspicious."

"That helps."

"Then Man-or-beast-san..."

"Man-or-beast-san!? Who is that person!?"

Oh wow...

The expression itself wasn't much, but she merely left the first half out, and I've become some half-assed despicable creature... Sure, she misheard, but what if it's something people mishear a lot? And I've been using it, even calling myself that...

"He's yelling at me!! I'm scared!!"

"Look, my bad I yelled, but it's awful calling someone Man-or-beast! Anybody would yell!"

"Really?... But, you called yourself that first. I've but complied in due sincerity."

"The world doesn't work like anything goes as long as it's done with sincerity... And you misheard."

Actually, the expression makes perfect sense, it's only when people try shortening it that it begins sounding like a mutant... But nevertheless.

"So I'm saying you mustn't shorten that expression even given you don't understand it."

"Right. Is that so? I see. So, it must be like the word "wild"... So it's the same thing as, whilst you accept characters who get excited and yell, "Wild!" in a delirious voice, you can't accept a character who would be introduced in narrative as, "He was prone to letting himself go wild..." Isn't it?"

"I'm not sure... I, for one, really can't accept a character that would get excited and yell, "Wild!" in a delirious voice..."

"So, how do I call you?"

"Normally would be fine, obviously."

"Very well. Araragi-san?"

"Yeah, that's normal, go normal!"

"I hate you, Araragi-san."

"..."

The air was stiff.

"You smell!! Please don't come near me!!"

"It's gotten worse than me smelling woman!?"

"Um... Indeed, "smell" may be a cruel description. I'll correct myself."

"Yeah, if you could."

"You smell stranger!! Please don't come near me!!"

"You're incoherent, we're officially not strangers!"

"Whatever, I do not care!! Please, promptly go elsewhere!!"

"Nah... So, are you lost?"

"This isn't much of a dire situation to me!! This much trouble is well-familiar to me!! It's a very usual thing for me!! For I'm a travel maker!!"

"A travel agent or a troublemaker?" If that were true, it would mean she wasn't lost, but alas. "...Wait, what are you acting all obstinate about?"

"I am not!!"

"I can tell."

"Have at you!!"

So Hachikuji shouted as she put her weight in a high kick that hit me. I hadn't thought a grade school girl capable of a kick like this, in a perfect position, feeling like my spine got clubbed. However, o hear and wail, there is an obvious difference between a grade-schooler and a high-schooler's body length. That's a difference you just can't step over. Hachikuji's high kick that could have well been aimed at my face, only hit my side at most. Surely, a damage will be taken either way if somebody lands their boot tip at your side, but that has no "unbearable" quality. Quickly, as soon as Hachikuji's leg hit me, I caught that leg in a hold around the ankle.

"Oh noes!" Hachikuji yells, but it's too late. ...I'll ask Senjougahara later about how grammatically correct the "noes" was, I decided, never letting Hachikuji, who was now standing on one foot, get any ideas before I, much like pulling out a radish in the field, pulled her other leg up. In jūdō, this was a form of one-armed shoulder throw. In jūdō, though, there's a rule against holds like this one, but alas, this is a street-fight. Hachikuji went airborne, and at the same time I saw the insides of her skirt right before me, at quite a daring angle too, but I, not being a pedophile, wasn't distracted this little. I jerked her across my back.

But, our difference played the other way this time. Hachikuji was small, and, while all it takes to hit the mat is a split-second in the air, a guy like me would have that little distance, too--just a little. However, in that little time, that little distance, Hachikuji could switch her thoughts, and used a free hand to grab my hair. I was, for a reason, growing it, so--even Hachikuji's small fingers could easily hold the clutch. As pain ran through the skin on my head, I let Hachikuji's ankle out of my hands.

But Hachikuji wasn't so naïve as to run. Still on my back, not waiting for touchdown, she turned, using my shoulder-blade as pivot, and proceeded attacking my head. It was a rebuff. She hit. However--shallowly. As her feet weren't steady, the power conveyance wasn't normal. Differences in age, in street-fighting experience became clear. I didn't rush with the finale; I calmed down and could have ended the fight with a single strike right now. Had I done that, it could have been my retaliation scene. An alley to my triumph.

I managed to catch her arm she had hit me with--it felt like left--wait, we're back-to-back, so it should be her right arm, so I caught her right arm and from that stance moved on to complete the new shoulder-throw!

This time--it worked.

Hachikuji hit the ground and was on her back.

I take my distance, accounting for a kick-back--

But it didn't look like she'd get back up.

I won.

"Damn, you stupid bitch--did you really think a grade-schooler could beat a high-schooler! Fuhahahahahhahah!"

One could then witness a high-school boy who fought a grade-school girl all-out, sent her over his shoulder full-force, and actually laughed haughtily, victorious.

That is, myself.

So Araragi Koyomi was somebody capable of bullying a little girl and laugh with joy... I got sick of myself.

"...Araragi-kun," an ice-cold voice called.

I turned around to face Senjougahara.

I think she couldn't stand watching and came over.

With an expression of utter suspicion.

"I did say I would follow you to hell, but, seeing how petty a human you were, my, eh, pain is absolutely another thing, so don't misunderstand me about that."

"...Please allow me to make an excuse."

"Sure."

"..."

I didn't make any.

There weren't any to be found.

So I toe the mark again.

"Well, leaving what's in the past for later, it's about her--" I point my finger at Hachikuji, who's still there biting the dust. I mean, she fell on her back, so not exactly, and then there's her rucksack that had cushioned her, so she should be okay. "She must have lost her way. I'm guessing she hasn't been with her parents or her friends, either. Uh, I've been here, in this park, since morning, so it's been a good while, and she was here once before you came, staring at the same billboard. I didn't think anything about her back then, but a lot of time passed and she came back, so she should be actually lost, right? It's not funny if someone's waiting for her around, so I thought I could help her."

"...Hmm."

Senjougahara nodded, which was something, but her dubious expression didn't change. Well, I could well see she was chock full of the question how that intention had come to blows, but I can't really explain that. I can but say it was two warrior souls crying out at each other.

"Oh."

"Yeah?"

"I mean, that makes sense... I understand the situation now."

I wonder about that part.

It could be she had just pretended that she did.

"Oh, yeah. Senjougahara, you mentioned you lived around here? Then you should know the place by address, right?"

"Sure... Well, as much as anyone."

That specification didn't bode well.

I wondered if she wasn't seeing me as a child abuser perchance. That was supposedly a step worse than even being a pedophile.

"'Ullo, Hachikuji. I know you're actually awake and playing dead or something. Show this lady here that note of yours."

I bend and peek into Hachikuji's face.

Her eyes are white.

...She's actually unconscious...

A girl showing the whites, well that's disturbing...

"What's wrong, Araragi-kun?..."

"Nothing..."

Using my back to shield the sight from Senjougahara's eyes, I nonchalantly slapped Hachikuji's cheeks twice, thrice. Not adding up to the violence, naturally, but to wake her up.

Presently Hachikuji comes to.

"Ngh... I was seeing a dream of sorts."

"Aw, really? What sort of dream?" I try being very kind. "Tell me, Hachikuji-chan. What kind of a dream was it?"

"A dream of a barbaric high school student boy abusing me."

"...Ah, isn't it a dream that means the opposite?"

"Oh. It was that kind of dream, wasn't it?"

Obviously that had been real, right before she lost consciousness.

I felt a heart-rending regret.

I took the note from Hachikuji, and handed it right to Senjougahara--except Senjougahara didn't move to take it. Instead, she stared at me, her eyes colder than the freezing point of water.

"What? Take it."

"...Somehow, I don't want to touch you."

Ugh.

Her poison, which I was supposedly used to, really hit the mark...

"But you're just taking the note."

"I don't even want to touch the things you have touched."

"..."

She hates me...

Senjougahara hates me in the commonest way now...

Huhh... It's weird, it had felt surprisingly good talking with her just recently...

"Okay, I got it, then... I'll simply read it aloud, okay? Umm..."

I read the address written on the note. Thankfully, there weren't any ambiguous characters in it, so I was able to read it fluently. Senjougahara heard me and said,

"Hm. I know where that is."

"That helps."

"Go past the place where I used to live then go a bit further. I'm not sure about the precise place, but once we're there, I can feel the right place. So, shall we go?"

No sooner said than done, Senjougahara turned on heels and started walking towards the park gate in a large pace. I had thought she would grumble more about how she didn't want to guide children, but she, surprisingly, just abided--no, rather, as Senjougahara hadn't even introduced herself to Hachikuji, hell, she hadn't looked in Hachikuji's eyes, so, somehow, Senjougahara hating children was probably a good prediction on my part, though. Or, as she'd said she wanted to do "one thing" for me, it could be she heeded my call there.

Ahh.

If that's true, it feels like a total waste...

"Oh well... Let's go, Hachikuji."

"Eh... Go where?"

Hachikuji seemed honestly puzzled.

Can't she assume things on other people talking?

"The place marked on your note, of course. That lady knows it, so she's going to guide you. Lucky you."

"...Sigh. A guidance, then..."

"Hmm? Weren't you, like, lost?"

"Yes, I am," Hachikuji admitted clearly. "I'm a lost snail."

"What? Snail?"

"No, I--" She shook her head. "I, it's nothing."

"...Okay. Uh, so, let's just follow that lady! Her name is Senjougahara, as in battlefield. Her crabbiness is on par with her name, but you just get used to it, then the extremeness of it becomes your habit, and then, deep inside, she's a comparatively frank, good person. A bit too frank, even."

"..."

"Oh jeez. Come on..."

Hachikuji still wouldn't move, so I got firmly a hold on her hand, and, pulling, or rather, dragging her, chased Senjougahara's back. Hachikuji was squeaking, "Ah, auh, au, ouuou," like a seal or a sea lion, but despite several tough moments, she managed to follow me without falling.

I decided I'd go pick my mountain bike up later.

For now, we left the 浪白 park behind.

Me still none the wiser as to how that reads.

Mayoi Snail - 004

I suppose it's about time I talked about spring break.

Over spring break, I was attacked by a vampire.

I say attacked, but really I stuck my head where it didn't belong. In fact, I pretty much literally stuck my head out, revealing my neck for those sharp fangs. At any rate, in this age where science is seen as all powerful and people think no darkness cannot be illuminated by it, I, Araragi Koyomi, was attacked by a vampire in the back country suburbs of Japan.

I was attacked by a beautiful demon.

Hers was blood-chilling beauty.

My blood was squeezed from my body and I became a vampire.

It sounds like a joke, but wasn't funny at all.

I gained a body that would burn up in the sun, loathed crosses, was vulnerable to garlic, and would melt from holy water. In exchange, I gained tremendous physical abilities. What awaited me afterwards was a hellish reality. I was saved from that hell by a middle aged man who happened to be passing by, Oshino Meme. Oshino Meme was a hopeless adult who went from trip to trip without a permanent residence. He brilliantly drove out the vampire and dealt with everything else too.

As a result, I returned to being human.

I retained a small fraction of the physical abilities (namely, a bit of heightened recovery speed and a heightened metabolism) and I was once more fine with the sun, crosses, garlic, and holy water.

Really, it wasn't much.

It wasn't even anything worth ending with "and I lived happily ever after".

It had already been resolved, so there isn't much to talk about. The only real remaining problem was having my blood drunk once a month and getting superhuman vision and such afterwards. However, those were all my own personal problems and I merely had to spend the rest of my life facing them.

In my case, I was lucky.

For me, it only lasted for the duration of spring break.

The hell was only about 2 weeks long.

It was different for Senjougahara.

For Senjougahara Hitagi, when she met that crab, she had to deal with the inconvenience to her body for over 2 years.

Most of her freedom had been taken by that inconvenience.

I had to wonder what it was like living that hell for over 2 years.

Given that, it may not have been all that surprising that she admirably felt more of an obligation toward me than was suitable for the little I had done. The physical inconvenience was one thing, but having the emotional inconvenience removed must have been more important to her than anything.

Emotional.

Mental.

Yes, those types of problems left you with no one to discuss it with and no one who understood you. It may be that they chained you up much more heavily and drove wedges between you and others much more deeply than physical problems.

For instance, I may have recovered, but I continued to be afraid of the morning sunlight coming in through the gap between the curtains. In that case, she may have similar lingering effects.

I knew one other person who had been helped by Oshino like Senjougahara and I, Class Rep Hanekawa Tsubasa. However, for her, it had been even shorter than for me at only a few days and she had lost the memories from that time. In a way, she may have been the luckiest of us all. However, in about every other way, Hanekawa had not been saved at all.

“It was around here.”

“Hah?”

“The house I used to live in was around here.”

“The house…?”

I looked in the direction Senjougahara was pointing, but all I saw was…

“…That’s a road.”

“Indeed it is.”

It was a wonderful road. From the color of the asphalt, it was clearly newly paved. Which meant…

“So the land was developed?”

“Actually, it is known as rezoning.”

“Did you know?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then you should look a little more surprised.”

“I do not show my emotions on my face.”

True enough, her expression had not changed in the slightest.

However, the way Senjougahara stood staring at the place could be interpreted as her feeling forlorn over having lost that destination.

“Everything really has completely changed. It’s hard to believe all this happened in less than a year.”

“……”

“How boring.”

After coming all that way, *that* is what she said.

And she truly did sound bored.

That had been one of the major reasons she had decided to break in her new clothes in that area and now she was done with it.

She turned around.

Still hiding behind my legs, Hachikuji Mayoi peered out at Senjougahara. In her caution, she remained silent. Despite being a child – or perhaps *due to* being a child – she must have instinctually seen Senjougahara as the greater threat than me. For a while, she had been avoiding Senjougahara by using me as a barrier. It was obvious that the living human that I was made a poor barrier and it was also obvious that she was avoiding Senjougahara, so I felt really awkward as the third party. However, Senjougahara showed no sign

of engaging Hachikuji (when she said “this way” or “down this road” it was always only to me), so they were even.

It was still hard to bear as the one caught between them, though.

Oddly enough, from the way Senjougahara was acting, it seemed like she would say “I don’t really know” instead of “I hate them” or “I dislike them” if I had asked her how she felt about children.

“The house had been sold, so I didn’t expect it to be exactly the same, but I certainly did not expect it to be a road now. That does leave me a little blue.”

“Yeah, I suppose it would.”

I had no choice but to agree.

I could certainly imagine what it would be like.

On the way here from the park, the old roads and the new roads had been all mixed together. Also, the guide map and the residential map on the sign at the park had seemed completely different from reality. It was enough to somehow wear down my motivation and I had no real attachment to the area.

Not that anything could be done about it.

The cityscape would change just as people would change.

Senjougahara let out a long sigh and said, “That was pointless and it ate up a lot of time. Let’s go, Araragi-kun.”

“Hm? You’re ready to go?”

“I am.”

“Oh, okay. Let’s go, Hachikuji.”

Hachikuji wordlessly nodded.

She may have thought saying something would reveal her location to Senjougahara.

Senjougahara started walking on head.

Hachikuji and I followed.

“How about you let go of my legs, Hachikuji? It’s hard to walk like this. Honestly, just quite clinging to me like Dakko-chan. You’re gonna make me trip.”

“……”

“Just say something already.”

At my coercion, Hachikuji said, “Araragi-san, I am not clinging to your giant leg because I *want* to.”

I then forcibly pried her from my leg.

As I did so, a nice ripping sound effect…was not actually made.

“How could you! I’m going to complain to the PTA!”

“Hehh. The PTA, you say?”

“The PTA is an amazing organization! A minor citizen with no influence like you stands no chance! They can toss you aside with just one finger!”

“Just one finger, huh? How scary. By the way Hachikuji, do you know what PTA stands for?”

“Eh? Um…”

As I had suspected, she did not, so she fell silent again.

Not that I knew.

At the very least, I managed to keep it from developing into an annoying argument.

“PTA stands for Parent Teacher Association,” answered Senjougahara from ahead of us. “It also stands for the medical term percutaneous transluminal angioplasty, but I doubt that is the answer you wanted, Araragi-kun, so Parent Teacher Association must be the correct answer.”

“Hehh. I had a vague idea that it was a gathering of parents, but I didn’t know it included the teachers too. You sure are knowledgeable, Senjougahara.”

“No, you are merely severely lacking in knowledge and incompetent, Araragi-kun.”

“I won’t complain about the lacking in knowledge part because it flowed from what I was saying, but incompetent was just plain unnecessary.”

“Was it? Then I will change it to pathetic.”

She did not even turn around.

She must really be in a bad mood…

A normal person may have been wondering what was different about that from her usual abuse, but after all the abuse she had sent my way, I could instinctually tell the difference. There was simply no edge to her words. If she had been in a good mood, Senjougahara would have showered me with much, much more abuse.

Hmm…

I wonder what the problem is.

Was it finding out her house is a road, or is it me?

Both seemed likely.

Whichever it was, even if you ignored my child abuse and all, our conversation had been cut short by Hachikuji's trouble. Even if it that had been the natural flow of events, it was natural for Senjougahara to not be at peace in her heart.

In that case, I have to get this Hachikuji Mayoi to her destination as quickly as possible and then work to put Senjougahara back in a good mood. I can treat her to lunch, and go shopping with her. If there is still time after that, we can go somewhere else for fun. Yeah, that should work. Thanks to my sisters, I can't just go home, so I can spend the day attending to Senjougahara. Luckily, I have plenty of money on me, so-…Wait, why am I so intent on doing things for her!?

I surprised myself.

"By the way, Hachikuji."

"What is it, Araragi-san?"

"About this memo."

I pulled the memo from my pocket.

I had not yet returned it to Hachikuji.

"What is at this address?"

And why are you headed there, I wanted to ask.

As the one guiding her, I wanted to know. Especially since she was an elementary school girl out on her own.

"Hah. I won't tell. I'm going to make use of my right to remain silent."

"……"

She really was an impertinent little girl.

Who was it that said children were pure and innocent?

“If you don’t tell me, I won’t take you there.”

“I never asked you to. I can go on my own.”

“But I thought you were lost?”

“What about it?”

“Hachikuji, for future reference, there’s nothing wrong with asking others for directions.”

“Maybe for people like you who have no confidence. You can rely on others all you want, but I don’t need to do that. For me, this kind of thing is no harder than using an everyday vending machine!”

“Hehh…So it’s sold at a set price?” was my odd response.

Well, from Hachikuji’s point of view, I was probably meddling. When I was in elementary school, I believed I could do anything on my own. I believed I did not need anyone’s help for anything and that I would never need someone else to rescue me.

And yet there was of course no way that I could truly do everything.

“Understood, young lady. Please, would you kindly tell me what is at this address?”

“Your words have no sincerity behind them.”

She was quite stubborn.

Both my middle school-aged sisters would have certainly fallen for that, but Hachikuji had a clever-looking face, so I decided she would not be dealt with as easily as some dumb kid.

Honestly, the trouble I go to.

“…Okay.”

A brilliant idea came to me.

I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket.

I had plenty of money on me.

“Young lady, would you like some money?”

“Yahoo! I’ll tell you anything!”

What a dumb kid.

I mean, that is just really stupid.

I had a feeling that no child had ever been kidnapped using that method, but Hachikuji seemed to have the makings of being the first.

“Someone named Tsunade-san lives there.”

“Tsunade? Is that a family name?”

“It is an excellent family name!” shouted back Hachikuji, seeming to have taken offense.

I understand that it wouldn’t feel good to have someone you knew’s name referred to in that way, but it was nothing to get mad about. It made her seem emotionally unstable.

“Hmm, so how do you know this person?”

“Tsunade-san is a relative of mine.”

“A relative, huh?”

I concluded that she must have been using that Sunday to head to her relative’s house. I did not know whether she had fairly laissez faire parents or if she had snuck out on her own, but it seemed that elementary school girl’s weekend adventure had failed.

“Is Tsunade-san a cousin you get along well with? From the look of that backpack, I’m guessing you’ve come a fair ways. Honestly, you should have done this over Golden Week instead. Or is there some reason that it had to be today?”

“Something like that.”

“You should at least spend Mother’s Day with your parents.”

That was not really something I should have been saying.

–Onii-chan, it’s because you’re like this.

What’s wrong with being like this?

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Araragi-san.”

“What do you know!?”

“I can just tell.”

“……”

It seemed that she had no real reason. She simply physiologically did not like having me lecture her.

How cruel.

“And what were you doing, Araragi-san? I don’t think any decent person would be sitting blankly on a park bench on a Sunday morning.”

“I wasn’t really doing anything. I was just-…”

I almost said, “killing time”, but I stopped myself at the last second.

That’s right. A guy who says he is killing time when asked what he is doing is worthless. That was close.

“I was just doing some touring.”

“Oh, some touring? How cool.”

She praised me.

I expected some horrible words to soon follow, but none came.

I see. So Hachikuji is capable of praising me…

“It was only on my bicycle, though.”

“I see. Well, a bike is standard for touring. It is a bit disappointing though. Do you not have a license, Araragi-san?”

“Unfortunately, my school’s rules prohibit getting a license. But a bike really is more dangerous, so I’d prefer a car.”

“I see. But then it would be fouring, wouldn’t it?”

“……”

Wow, now that’s a funny mistake. She thinks touring is spelled “two”-ring. Should I correct or her let it slide? I’m not sure which one is the kinder option.

By the way, Senjougahara gave no response to this as she walked on ahead.

She made no attempt at all to enter the conversation.

I wondered if she was simply unable to hear such a low intelligence conversation.

Incidentally, that was when I saw Hachikuji Mayoi’s carefree smile for the first time. It was quite charming and it seemed to open my heart. The usual way of describing that type of smile was to say it was like a blooming sunflower, but it was also the type of smile that most people stopped making after getting much older than her.

“Sigh. Oh, god.”

That was a close one. If I was a lolicon, I would fallen for her there. I really am glad I'm not a lolicon.

"The roads around here really are a tangled mess. What kind of structure is this? How did you think you could navigate through all this on your own?"

"This isn't my first time doing this."

"Oh, I see. But then why are you lost?"

"…Because it's been a while," said Hachikuji, sounding ashamed.

Yes, what you think you can do and what you can do are two different things. What you think is nothing more than thoughts. That is true for elementary schoolers, high schoolers, and people of every other age.

"By the way, Arararagi-san."

"You added an extra 'ra'!"

"Sorry, I bit my tongue."

"Don't bite your tongue in such an unpleasant way…"

"It can't be helped. Everyone says things wrong sometimes. Or have you said everything perfectly from the moment you were born, Araragi-san?"

"I can't say I've done that, but I know I don't say people's names wrong."

"Then say Basu Gasu Bakuhatsu[1] three times fast."

"That is not someone's name."

"Yes, it is. I know three people named that, so it must be a fairly common name."

She was brimming with confidence.

I was shocked at just how obvious children's lies were.

"Basu gasu bakuhatsu, basu gasu bakuhatsu, basu gasu bakuhatsu."

I ended up saying it.

"What animal devours dreams?" asked Hachikuji as soon as I was done.

When did this become the ten-times quiz[2]?

"…The baku?"

"Nope. Wrong," said Hachikuji with a triumphant expression. "The animal that devours dreams is…" She put on a fearless smile. "…the human."

"This is no time to be clever!"

I shouted louder than I meant to because I subconsciously really did think it was clever.

Anyway, the residential area was very quiet.

As we walked along, we did not pass by anyone else. The area seemed to be one of those where the people who had to leave left in the mornings and those who did not need to leave stayed in all day. Well, the area I lived in was pretty much the same. The main difference was that the houses here were much larger. It must have been an area populated by mostly rich people. I recalled that Senjougahara's father was a big shot in a foreign investment company, so I surmised that that was the type of people that lived there.

Foreign investments, hm?

It was not a term that really seemed to fit that back country area.

“Hey, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara, speaking up for the first time in a while. “Could you tell me the address again?”

“Hm? Sure. Are we close?”

“Perhaps, or maybe…” she said vaguely.

Not understanding what she meant, I read off the memo once more.

Senjougara nodded and said, “It seems we overshot it.”

“Eh? We did?”

“It seems that way,” she said calmly. “If you wish to rebuke me, do so as much as you like.”

“Um, I’m not going to rebuke you over something like that.”

Why does she get so serious like that?

She was so honorable that it seemed more like she did not know when to give up.

“I see.”

With a composed face that showed no impatience, Senjougahara turned around to face the path she had just come down. To avoid her, Hachikuji made the exact opposite movements in order to keep me in the center between them.

“Why are you so afraid of Senjougahara? She hasn’t done anything to you. In fact, while it may be hard to tell at first glance, she is the one guiding you, not me.”

I was merely following her.

I really was in no position to say anything self important.

Even if she disliked Senjougahara due to some child's intuition, she was going too far. Not even Senjougahara was made of steel. Even she would be hurt if Hachikuji continued to avoid her like that. And even if I set aside my concern for Senjougahara, Hachikuji's attitude toward her was wrong from a moral standpoint.

"I am at a loss as to what to say in response to that," said Hachikuji with surprising modesty and despondency.

She then lowered her voice to a whisper and said, "But can't you feel it, Araragi-san?"

"Feel what?"

"The fierce animosity emanating from her."

"……"

It seemed to be something more than intuition.

The worst part was that I could not say she was wrong.

"She seems to hate me. I can feel her will strongly telling me to disappear because I am in the way."

"I doubt she's actually thinking that, but…Hmm."

Here goes.

I was afraid, but I decided to ask.

The answer was obvious to me, but it still seemed that I had to ask.

"Hey, Senjougahara."

"What?"

As usual, she did not turn around.

It might have been me that she thought was in the way and wanted to disappear.

We both thought of the other as a friend, so it was strange how we were simply unable to get along.

“Do you…hate children?”

“Yes. I absolutely loathe them. I wish every last one of them would die.”

She showed no restraint.

Hachikuji let out a short cry of terror and shrank down behind me.

“I have no idea how to approach them. A while back – I think it was in middle school – I bumped into a child of about 7 while shopping in a department store.”

“Oh, did you make the kid cry?”

“No, it wasn’t that. It was what I said to the 7 year old child. I said, ‘Are you okay? Are you hurt? I’m sorry. I really am.’”

“……”

“I had no idea what to say to a child, so I lost my cool. That led me to give such a horrible response. It was such a shock that, ever since, I have endeavored to turn my hatred toward the things known as children whether they are human or not.”

It was something like an outburst of anger.

I understood her reasoning, but I could not understand how she felt.

“By the way, Araragi-kun.”

“What?”

“It seems we overshot it again.”

“Hahh?”

Overshot what…? Oh, the address.

Eh…? Really? Twice?

With an unfamiliar area, it was not uncommon for the address to not quite match up with the actual layout of things, but this was the area Senjougahara had lived in until recently.

“If you are able to rebuke me for this, then do so as much as you like.”

“I’m not going to rebuke you over something like-…wait. Senjougahara, did your line change slightly from before?”

“Oh, did it? I didn’t notice.”

“What’s going on? Oh, right. You mentioned rezoning before, didn’t you? Come to think of it, if your house is now a road, it isn’t too surprising that things have changed so much from what you remember.”

“No, it isn’t that.” Senjougahara checked her surroundings. “The number of roads has increased, old houses have disappeared, and new ones have been built, but none of the old roads are completely gone. I should not be getting lost like this.”

“Hmm?”

But the fact was, she actually *was* getting lost. It was possible she simply did not want to admit her own careless mistake. She could be fairly obstinate in her own way.

“What?” asked Senjougahara. “From your expression, you seem to have some kind of complaint. Araragi-kun, if you have something to

say, then be a man and say it. If you like, I will strip naked and prostrate myself before you right here and now."

"Are you trying to make everyone think I'm the world's worst man?"

How could I let her do that in a residential area like that?

Also, that wasn't the kind of thing I was into.

"If it would show the world that Araragi Koyomi is the world's worst man, then nude prostration is a cheap price to pay."

"What's cheap is your pride."

I couldn't figure out whether she had too much or too little pride.

"But I will keep on my socks."

"Even if you end this with a lame joke, I don't have any strange fetishes like that."

"When I said socks, I meant fishnet stockings."

"Going farther toward crazy isn't going to help."

Actually, even if my tastes don't lie there, I wouldn't mind seeing her in fishnet stockings. She doesn't even have to be nude otherwise. Hm, if she was wearing stockings like that…

"I can tell from your face that you are thinking indecent thoughts, Araragi-kun."

"Of course not. Does a person who endeavors to hold up the principles of purity such as myself seem like he would be the owner of such a vulgar personality? I am truly shocked that you would think that, Senjougahara."

“Oh? Whether there is any basis or not, I try to always say such things to you, Araragi-kun. The fact that this time you simply denied it without any kind of retort seems suspicious.”

“Uuh…”

“Well, if nude prostration is not enough for you, I suppose you must be intending to use a permanent marker to write lewd words on every inch of my flesh.”

“My thoughts didn’t go that far!”

“Then how far *did* they go?”

“More importantly, umm, Hachikuji.”

I forcibly changed the subject.

I had learned how to do that by watching Senjougahara.

“Sorry, but this looks like it’s going to take longer than I thought. But if you recognize this area…”

“I do not.”

Hachikuji’s tone was surprisingly calm. In fact, it was an emotionless and mechanical tone that sounded like she was reciting a formula she had memorized.

“It is probably impossible.”

“Eh? Probably?”

“If probably isn’t enough for you, then it is definitely impossible.”

“……”

It wasn’t that probably wasn’t enough for me.

Nor was it that definitely *was* enough.

Even so, I was unable to say anything.

It was that tone of voice.

“No matter how many times I try, I will never get there.”

Hachikuji…

“I will never get there.”

Hachikuji repeated herself.

“I will never get to my mother’s place.”

She was like a broken record.

She was like an unbroken record.

“After all, that is what happens with the lost snail.”

Mayoi Snail - 005

“The lost cow,” said Oshino Meme in a low, annoyed groan that made it sound like he had been forcibly woken up midway through 1000 years of being peacefully sealed away. He didn’t have low blood pressure, but it seemed he had a difficult time waking up. The difference from his normal sociability was striking. “That would be the lost cow.”

“Cow? No, not a cow. She said snail.”

“If you write it with the kanji, it has cow in it. Oh, Araragi-kun, were you writing snail in katakana? You must have a low IQ. It takes the kanji for spiral[3] and changes the water radical on the left to the insect radical. Just add the kanji for cow[4] at the end and you have snail[5].”

“Spiral...to snail, hm?”

“On its own, it’s pronounced ka or ke, but it’s really not used often outside of the word snail. A snail’s shell does have a spiral on it after all. It’s also similar to the kanji for calamity[6]...and maybe that’s a little more symbolic. There are countless monsters that lead people astray, but when it comes to ones that obstruct one’s path...well, surely even you are familiar with the nurikabe, Araragi-kun. If it’s that type and is a snail, then it must be the lost cow. In this case, the name refers to its essence not its form, so a cow and a snail are essentially the same. As for its form, art of it with a human form remains. Araragi-kun, most of the time with monsters, the person who came up with the name and the person who did the art are different people. You can pretty much say that’s true for all of them.

Generally, the name comes first. I say the name, but really it's more of a general idea. Well, it's kind of like the illustrations for a light novel. Before the visual form of a character is made, a general idea about the character exists. It is often said that a name represents the body, but the body being referred to there is not the physical body or the outer appearance. It refers to the essence of what it is...Yawwn."

He really did sound tired.

However, that eliminated a lot of the superficiality of his personality, so it made him easier to talk to. Speaking with Oshino could be truly tiring.

The snail.

A terrestrial pulmonate with a spiral shell of clade Stylommatophora.

Slugs were much more common to run across, but that was a type that had retrogressed away from having a shell.

If you sprinkled salt on them, they melted.

After we left off, Senjougahara Hitagi, Hachikuji Mayoi, and I had retried and continued five more times. We tried everything from shortcuts that led directly there to overwhelmingly long and out of the way detours, but every single one of them turned out to be magnificently wasted effort. We knew for sure that we were near our destination, but we were simply unable to reach it. In the end, we even tried going from door to door, stopping at each and every house, but even that was fruitless.

As a truly last resort, Senjougahara used some special function of her cell phone (I didn't really understand) that was a navigation system using GPS or something.

However, her phone lost its signal just before she could download the data.

It was at that point that I finally, reluctantly, and much too late truly understood what was going on. She had not said anything, but it seemed Senjougahara had sensed this much earlier and Hachikuji likely understood the situation much more deeply than either of us.

For me, it was a demon.

For Hanekawa, it was a cat.

For Senjougahara, it was a crab.

And for Hachikuji, it seemed to be snail.

That meant that I could not simply give up on it all. If it had been a normal case of a lost child that we had been unable to resolve on our own, we could have taken her to a nearby police box and felt good about how we had helped out. However, *that side of things* was involved...

Senjougahara was also opposed to simply bringing Hachikuji to a police box.

Senjougahara had been immersed in that side of things for years.

If she felt that way, there was no mistaking it.

However, that also meant it was a problem that Senjougahara and I could not deal with on our own. Neither of us had special powers to that end or anything like that. All we were able to do was *know* that it was a problem on that side of things.

It is said that knowledge is power.

However, merely knowing left us utterly powerless.

It was a quick and dirty solution and we didn't particularly like having to take it, but at the end of our discussion, we decided to consult Oshino.

Oshino Meme.

He had saved me...no, us.

However, he was certainly the type of person you would want to avoid being around as much as possible if he had not saved you. He was over thirty yet had no permanent residence, and had been sleeping in an old abandoned cram school ever since he first came to this town over a month ago. That alone would be enough for a normal person to draw back.

–*For now, I have an interest in this town.*

That was what he had said.

As such, he was a true wanderer who could easily disappear at any time. However, we had met him the past Monday for Senjougahara's issue and on the Tuesday to settle things afterwards. Also, I had met Oshino just the day before, so he was surely still in that abandoned building.

That left the issue of how to contact him.

He had no cell phone.

That meant the only option was to head there to speak with him directly.

Senjougahara had only just met Oshino the week before and she really barely knew him, so I was the natural candidate to go, but Senjougahara herself volunteered.

"Would you lend me your mountain bike?"

“Sure, but do you know where to go? I could draw you a map, if you like.”

“Araragi-kun, you are not going to make me happy by worrying about me if you assume I have as poor a memory as you. In fact, it will upset me.”

“...I see.”

Her words upset me.

They truly did.

“To be honest, I had wanted to ride this mountain bike from the moment I saw it in the parking lot.”

“So you were being honest when you said it was the best... I had assumed otherwise because you aren’t the most honest person.”

“Also,” said Senjougahara, whispering into my ear. “Do not leave me alone with that child.”

“.....”

“I won’t know what to do.”

Well, I guess that isn’t too surprising.

And I bet Hachikuji wouldn’t like it much either.

I handed the mountain bike’s key to Senjougahara. Senjougahara had previously said that she did not own a bicycle, so loaning my precious bike to her might have actually been a bit dangerous, but I had a feeling that the bike would be fine with her.

And so I ended up waiting for Senjougahara to contact me.

I had returned to the bench in that park of unknown pronunciation.

Hachikuji Mayoi sat next to me.

She sat far enough away that another person could sit between us.

She could run off at any time if she wanted to.

In fact, her position made it look like she was about to.

I had explained to her the issues that Senjougahara and I had held as well as our continuing circumstances related to those problems, but that seemed to have only made her raise her guard even further. I had hoped to lower her guard a bit, but my failed attempt had just made things worse. I had no choice but to start back from square one.

After all, trust was incredibly important.

Sigh...

I guess I should try talking to her.

One thing had caught my attention before.

“I thought I heard you mention your mother before. What did you mean by that? I thought Tsunade-san was a relative of yours?”

“.....”

No response.

Apparently, she was once again making use of her right to remain silent.

I doubted the same method would continue to work, and that method had only been any fun because it had been a joke. If I continued to use it, it would start to seem – even to me – like I was serious about it.

And so...

“Hachikuji-chan, I’ll let you have some ice cream, so could you come a little closer?”

“Sure thing!”

Hachikuji immediately slid herself closer to me.

...Apparently whether I actually make good on my promises doesn’t matter.

In fact, I had not even given her a single yen before, so she was quite an easy person to manipulate.

“Anyway, about what I was saying before...”

“What was that again?”

“Your mother.”

“.....”

And the right to remain silent was back.

I continued speaking anyway.

“Were you lying when you said it was a relative’s house?”

“...That wasn’t a lie,” said Hachikuji in a peevish tone of voice. “My mother is one of my relatives.”

“Well, I suppose that’s true, but...”

Isn’t that just splitting hairs?

And why would a girl be out on a Sunday with a backpack, heading for her mother’s house?

“Also,” said Hachikuji in the same peevish tone. “Even though I called her my mother, she unfortunately isn’t my mother anymore.”

“Oh...”

Divorce.

Living only with one's father.

I had heard a similar story quite recently.

That was the story of Senjougahara's family.

"Tsunade was my name up until I was in third grade. When I was taken in by my father, my family name changed to Hachikuji."

"Hm? Wait a second."

Things had started to get a little complicated, so I started organizing the information in my head.

Hachikuji is in fifth grade, her family name was Tsunade up until the third grade (that must be why she got so angry about what I said about that name), and her family name changed to Hachikuji when she was taken in by her father. ...Oh, I get it. When her parents got married, her father must have taken on her mother's family name. The married name doesn't have to come from the guy. So then they got divorced and her mother, Tsunade-san, left the house and moved here...Actually, it was probably to her parents' house.

And then Hachikuji set out this Sunday, on Mother's Day, to visit her mother.

That name was a precious name her mother and father had given her.

"Ahh, and here I was acting all superior and telling you to stay home with your parents..."

I could see why she hadn't wanted to hear that from me.

“No, this is not because this is Mother’s Day. I always want to head to my mother’s house if I have a chance.”

“...I see.”

“But I can never reach it.”

“.....”

Her parents had gotten divorced and her mother had left the house.

She could no longer see her mother.

She wanted to see her mother.

And so Hachikuji had tried to visit her mother.

She had put on that backpack and...

And she had...

“So you met it then.”

“Met it? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Hmm.”

No matter how many times she had tried to visit her mother after that, she had never once made it to her house.

Simply hearing that she had tried countless times and failed every time may have made her sound stupid, but I felt it was wonderful how she had not given up even after all that.

However...

“.....”

It was not really right to compare, but her trouble seemed quite a bit safer than the troubles Hanekawa, Senjougahara, or myself had dealt with. She had no physical trouble and no mental trouble. Instead, she

only had the phenomenal trouble of not being able to do something she should have been able to do. The problem was not something within her.

The problem was external.

Her life was not in danger.

She could live her everyday life without any real difficulty.

Even if that was true, I decided that – no matter what – I would not speak about her problem like I knew what I was talking about. No matter what had happened to me over spring break, I had no right to say that kind of thing to Hachikuji.

And so I aimed to say nothing unnecessary.

“You certainly have it tough,” was all I said.

That was what I really, truly thought.

In truth, I wanted to rub her head.

And so I tried to.

“Grr!”

I ended up getting my hand bit.

“Oww! What the hell was that for, you brat!?”

“Grrrrr!”

“Ow! Ow ow ow!”

This was no joke, play-bite, or way of hiding her embarrassment. She truly was biting down as hard as she could. I could feel Hachikuji’s teeth ripping through my skin and ripping through my flesh. Without even looking, I could tell blood was spewing out. It really was nothing to joke about.

Why is she doing this!? Wait, don't tell me I fulfilled the requirements for this event without even realizing it!

Does this mean the battle has begun!?

I took my other hand and clenched it into a tight fist. It was as if I was trying to crush the air. I then drove that fist into Hachikuji's solar plexus. The solar plexus was one of the vital areas of the human body that nothing could be done about. As her teeth remained deeply embedded in my hand despite that blow, Hachikuji was quite something, but for an instant, the strength of her bite lessened. I used that opening to use the ridiculous strength of my arm. Hachikuji was digging into my flesh, but that left the rest of her unguarded. And luckily, Hachikuji was standing up slightly from the bench seat.

I took the hand I had punched her with, opened the fist, and held her up with it. In the process, I felt something surprisingly filled-in for a fifth grade girl, but I was not a lolicon, so it had so little effect on me that you might as well say it was nothing. I used momentum to swing her completely around and upside down. As she was still biting my hand, the area around her neck was all twisted around, but that was no problem. As long as she was biting my hand, any attack near her head had the danger of coming back to bite me...literally. Due to flipping her over, Hachikuji's body was displayed before me like a pile of tiles to be broken with a karate chop, and that was my target. More specifically, my target was her solar plexus where I had already punched her once.

"Khaahhh!"

It worked perfectly.

Hachikuji's teeth finally let go of my hand.

At the same time, she coughed up something that looked like gastric juices.

And then she lost consciousness.

“Heh...Actually, I guess this isn’t funny.”

I shook my bitten hand to loosen it.

“After the first time, this kind of victory is so empty...”

Standing there was a high school boy who had punched an elementary school girl twice in the most central of the human body’s vital spots, knocking her unconscious, and who had then started putting on airs of nihilism.

And as before, that boy was me.

.....

Striking, grabbing, and throwing were one thing, but out and out punching a girl was out of the question.

Araragi Koyomi had done more than enough to be deemed the world’s worst man without even needing Senjougahara to prostrate nude before him.

“Ahh...But it’s because she bit me all of a sudden.”

I looked down at the bite wound.

Gehh...Wow, I can see the bone... I didn’t know a human could do this much damage with a bite...

However, even if I could feel the pain, that level of wound would heal before long *even if I just stood there*.

As the wound closed up fast enough to see, it looked like a video being fast-forwarded or rewound. It reminded me just how different

an existence I was from the norm. Being reminded of that put me in a bit of a dark, bitter mood.

Honestly, you're pathetic.

You think you're the world's worst man? Don't make me laugh.

Do you really think you qualify as human anymore?

"That is a scary look on your face, Araragi-kun," said a sudden voice.

For an instant, I thought it was Senjougahara, but it couldn't have been. Senjougahara would never speak in such a cheerful voice.

Standing before me was the class rep.

It was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

It was Sunday and yet she was wearing her school uniform. Although I suppose that was normal for her. An excellent student like her enjoys being dressed like that. With the same hairstyle and glasses as always, the only difference from when she was at school was the handbag she was holding.

"H-Hanekawa."

"You look surprised to see me. Well, I suppose that's for the best. Heh heh heh."

Hanekawa showed me an excellent smile.

It was a very carefree smile.

In fact, it was the same as the one Hachikuji had made before...

"What are you doing here?"

"U-um, what are *you* doing here?"

I was unable to hide my agitation.

I had to wonder just how much she had seen.

If that mass of diligence, that living example of proper conduct, that pillar of innocence that was Hanekawa Tsubasa had seen me acting violently toward an elementary school girl, that would be very, very bad in a completely different way than if Senjougahara had seen.

I didn't want to be expelled after making it all the way to the third year.

"Why do you need to ask me? I live around here. If either of us being here is odd, it's you Araragi-kun. Are you in this area for any particular reason?"

"Um..."

Oh, right.

Senjougahara and Hanekawa went to the same middle school.

Since it had been public school, they must have been in the same school district. In that case, Senjougahara's old domain being within Hanekawa's area of activity was not surprising. Since they went to different elementary schools, they must not have lived in the exact same area though.

"No, not really. I'm just here to...y'know... kill some time or-..."

Whoops.

I just said I was killing time.

"Ah ha. I see. Killing time. How nice. Not having anything to do is wonderful. It's so freeing, isn't it? I guess I was killing time too."

"....."

She really was a different being from Senjougahara in every way.

They were both smart, but I suppose that is the difference between top class and the top.

“You know how difficult it is for me to be at my home, right, Araragi-kun? Since the library isn’t open, Sundays are my walking days. It’s good for my health.”

“I’d say you’re worrying too much.”

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The girl with the strangely shaped wings.

At school, she was a mass of diligence, a living example of proper conduct, a pillar of innocence, the class rep among class reps, and impeccable, but she had some discord in her family life.

Some discord and a distortion.

Due to that, she had been possessed by a cat.

She had been possessed through a slight gap in her heart.

That may have been a good example of the fact that no one could be truly perfect, but when that problem had been resolved and she had been freed from the cat, her memories had been lost. And so the discord and the distortion had not been dealt with.

The discord and the distortion remained.

“The library not being open on Sundays seems to display just how uncivilized the area we live in is. Ah ha. I really don’t like that at all.”

“I don’t even know where the library *is*.”

“C’mon now. Don’t say things like that. It makes it sound like you’ve already given up. There’s still time until the entrance exam, so you can do it.”

“Hanekawa, sometimes baseless encouragement can be even more painful than direct abuse.”

“But you can do math, right, Araragi-kun? If you can do math, there’s no way you can’t do the other subjects.”

“Math is easy because you don’t have to memorize anything.”

“You certainly are uncooperative. Well, whatever. I’ll just leave you with a “c’mon, now” for that. By the way, Araragi-kun, is that your little sister?”

Hanekawa pointed toward Hachikuji who was lying on the ground next to the bench.

“My little sisters aren’t that small.”

“Oh.”

“They’re in middle school.”

“Hmm.”

“Umm, she’s lost. Her name is Hachikuji Mayoi.”

“Mayoi?”

“It’s spelled with the first kanji of truth and the first kanji of dusk. And her family name is-...”

“I know how that must be spelled. You often hear the term Hachikuji in the Kansai area. That’s a very historic and pompous sounding name. Come to think of it, I think the temple in Shinonome Monogatari was named...no, wait. The kanji are different.”

“...You know everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t know everything. I only know what I know.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Hachikuji Mayoi, hm? Now those are two names that go together well. Oh? I think she’s woken up.”

I looked over at Hachikuji and saw her blinking her eyes. After hesitantly looking around as if to check on her surroundings, Hachikuji sat up.

“Hello, Mayoi-chan. I am this boy’s friend. My name is Hanekawa Tsubasa.”

Her tone of voice was straight out of Taisou no Onii-san.

Or in her case, I guess it would be Taisou no Onee-san.

Hanekawa was probably the type that would have no problem talking to cats or dogs in baby talk.

In response, Hachikuji said, “Please do not talk to me. I hate you.”

Does she say that to everyone?

“Oh? Did I do something to make you hate me? You shouldn’t say that to people when you first meet them, Mayoi-chan. Uri uri.”

However, Hanekawa showed no sign of being affected by Hachikuji’s words.

She also easily managed to pull off what I had not: rub Hachikuji Mayoi’s head.

“Hanekawa, do you like kids?”

“Hm? Do you not?”

“No, it isn’t me that doesn’t.”

“Hmm. Well, yes, I do like children. When I think about how I used to be like this, it gives me a nice warm feeling inside. Uri uri.”

Hanekawa continued to rub Hachikuji’s head.

Hachikuji tried to resist.

But it was useless.

“U-uuhhh...”

“You’re so cute, Mayoi-chan. Ahh! I just want to eat you up. Your cheeks are so squishy and soft. Kyahh!! Oh, but...”

Her tone suddenly changed.

It was now the tone she occasionally turned on me at school.

“You shouldn’t bite people’s hands like that. In this case, he was fine, but a normal person would have been seriously injured! Meh!”

She hit her. With her fist. Like it was nothing.

“U-uuhh?”

The quick transition from kindness to being struck left Hachikuji in utter confusion and Hanekawa used that opportunity to forcibly turn her to face me.

“Okay! Now say you’re sorry.”

“I-I’m sorry, Araragi-san.”

She apologized.

That impertinent brat whose tone of voice alone would be polite apologized.

It was quite a shock.

Wait, this means Hanekawa had been watching for a bit before she approached... I see. I get it. Normally thinking, when you’re bit to the point of your flesh being torn out, self defense is justified. And come to think of it, she’s the one that attacked first with the fight from earlier too...

While Hanekawa was not all that flexible, she was still not *that* much of a stickler for the rules.

She was merely fair.

From the way she had handled that, Hanekawa seemed used to dealing with children. I was pretty sure she was an only child, so she had done quite well indeed.

Incidentally, I had already realized that Hanekawa treated me like a child at school, but let's not think about that too much.

"And Araragi-kun, what you did was wrong too!"

She used the exact same tone on me.

She seemed intent on forcing me to think about how she treated me.

However, she actually realized what she had done and cleared her throat before starting over.

"Well, anyway, that was wrong."

"You mean...punching her?"

"No, I mean you need to properly scold her."

"Oh..."

"Of course, you also shouldn't have punched her, but if you're going to strike a child – or anyone for that matter – you need to tell them what they have done to deserve it."

"....."

"That is what it means to talk it out."

"Whenever I speak with you, I always learn something."

She really had a way of draining the poison out of a situation.

She proved that there were good people in the world.

That alone made me feel like I had been saved.

“So you said she was lost? Where does she want to go? Is it nearby? If so, I can probably show her the way.”

“Umm, Senjougahara went to get someone to help, so...”

Even if she had a connection to that side of things, Hanekawa had no memories of it. She knew, but she had forgotten. I felt it was best not to pick at those memories like a scab.

I appreciated her offer, but...

“It seems to have taken a lot of time, but she should be done soon.”

“Huh? Senjougahara-san? Araragi-kun, you were with Senjougahara-san? Hmm? Senjougahara-san has been absent from school recently, but...Hmm? Oh, come to think of it, you were asking about her the other day...Hmm?”

Ah.

She’s getting suspicious.

Hanekawa’s powers of misunderstanding were about to explode.

“Ahh! I see! So that’s it!”

“No, I’m pretty sure you have the wrong idea...”

I knew it was wrong for an idiot like me to deny the answer given by a genius like her, but...

“Your powers of delusion outdo even those of those girls that are into yaoi.”

“Yaoi? What’s that?

Hanekawa tilted her head to the side in confusion.

The genius student did not know this.

“It’s an abbreviation of ‘YAma nashi Ochi nashi Imi shinchou[7]’.”

“That sounds made up. Fine, I’ll look it up on my own.”

“You certainly are diligent.”

.....

What if this leads to Hanekawa straying down the wrong path?

It’ll be my fault.

“Since I seem to be interrupting, I will be going. Say hello to Senjougahara-san for me. Also, today is Sunday so I won’t say too much, but make sure to restrain yourselves some. Also, we have a history quiz, so don’t forget to study. Also, the major preparations for the cultural festival are about to begin, so work hard. Also...”

After that, Hanekawa added on 9 more alsos.

She may have been the next great user of “also” after Natsume Souseki[8].

“Oh, Hanekawa. Can I ask you one thing? Do you know of a Tsunade-san that lives around here somewhere?”

“A Tsunade-san? Hmm...well...”

She seemed to be searching her memory. I got my hopes up that this meant she might know, but...

“No, I don’t,” she said.

“So there *are* things you don’t know.”

“Didn’t I tell you? I only know what I know. For everything else, I am no help at all.”

“I see.”

It was true that she hadn’t known what yaoi meant either.

It seemed things would not be resolved so easily.

“Sorry I was unable to meet your expectations.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Then I will be going. Bye bye.”

And then Hanekawa Tsubasa left the park.

I wonder if she would have known how to pronounce the park’s name.

Maybe I should have made that my question.

And then my cell phone started to ring.

An 11 digit number was displayed on the screen.

“.....”

Sunday, May 14th, 14:25:30.

That was the instant I obtained Senjougahara’s phone number.

Mayoi Snail - 006

“So what kind of monster or apparition is this lost cow? And how do we drive it away?”

“Araragi-kun, why are your thoughts always so violent? Did something good happen?”

Apparently, Senjougahara had woken up Oshino. He had complained that she was horrible for interrupting his Sunday morning rest, but it was already the afternoon and for Oshino every day was Sunday and it was summer break year round. I really did not feel the government had given him the right to say something like that.

Oshino did not have a cell phone, so he had been forced to use Senjougahara’s to call me. However, the reason he did not have a phone was not merely his principles or a lack of money. It seemed Oshino was terrible with electronics.

When I had heard him say, “Hey, Tsundere-chan, what button am I supposed to press when I want to talk?” I almost hung up right then and there.

It’s not a two-way radio.

“But what is going on? This goes beyond unusual. It’s abnormal. You really have met a lot of monsters in this short time, Araragi-kun. I’m quite pleased. Just getting attacked by a vampire would have been more than enough, but then there was Class Rep-chan’s cat, Tsundere-chan’s crab, and now you’ve met this snail.”

“I’m not the one that met it.”

“Hm? You’re not?”

“How much did Senjougahara tell you?”

“Oh, I think she told me everything, but I was still half asleep. It’s all a bit vague, so I must be misremembering something. Oh, but I have always wanted a cute high school girl to wake me up. This was like a wonderful dream. Araragi-kun, thanks to you, the dream I’ve had ever since middle school has been fulfilled.”

“...And how does that feel?”

“Hmm, I’m still too tired to really tell.”

Fulfilled dreams were often like that.

It really didn’t matter who you were or what the circumstances were.

“Oh, Tsundere-chan is giving me a frightful look. My, my. How scary. Did something good happen?”

“Who knows...”

“You don’t know? You really don’t understand girls, do you, Araragi-kun? Well, whatever. Heh. It is true that once you get involved in this world, it’s easier to get dragged back in, but this is still too concentrated. Class Rep-chan and Tsundere-chan are your classmates and, from what I heard, this is where they’re both from, right?”

“Senjougahara doesn’t live here anymore, though. But I don’t think that matters. I don’t think Hachikuji lives here.”

“Hachikuji?”

“Oh, you hadn’t heard? Hachikuji Mayoi is the name of the kid who met the snail.”

“Oh...”

He paused for a second.

It did not seem to be simply due to his drowsiness.

“Hachikuji Mayoi, hm? Ha ha. I see. It’s all coming together. What I was told is coming back to me now. I see. It almost seems like fate. It’s pretty much a pun.”

“A pun? Oh, you mean that Mayoi is pronounced the same as “lost”? And then a lost child meeting the lost cow. That’s a surprisingly unfunny joke, Oshino.”

“I would never make a joke that crappy. I don’t laugh at nothing. As they say, a smile can hide a blade. I’m talking about Hachikuji being paired with Mayoi. Are you unfamiliar with the term Hachikuji? It comes from the fifth stanza of Shinonome Monogatari.”

“Hahh?”

Hanekawa had mentioned that, too.

Not that I knew what they were talking about.

“You really don’t know anything, do you, Araragi-kun? That does give purpose to my explanations, but I really don’t have time right now. I’m pretty tired. Hm? What’s that, Tsundere-chan?”

Senjougahara seemed to have said something to Oshino, so the conversation was cut off for a short bit. I of course couldn’t hear what she was saying and it almost seemed like she was purposefully speaking quietly enough that I would not be able to hear.

I doubted there was some secret they were keeping from me, but I was still curious.

“Ah...Hmm.”

I could only hear Oshino’s words of confirmation.

And then I heard a long, heavy sigh.

“Araragi-kun, you really are worthless.”

“Hah? Where did that come from all of a sudden? I didn’t say a thing about killing time.”

“If you have Tsundere-chan do this much for you, she’s going to feel responsible. Having the girl fix your problems for you is just pathetic for a guy. What the girl is supposed to fix up is the guy himself, not his troubles.”

“Um, uh... I do feel bad about getting Senjougahara wrapped up in this. And I do feel responsible. Her issue was only just resolved last week and now this...”

“No, not that. Honestly, Araragi-kun, I think you’re getting a bit full of yourself after resolving three monster problems in a row. Just so you know, not everything you see or feel is real.”

“...I wasn’t trying to be.”

I instinctually shrank back from those harsh words. He had hit me where it hurt. And unfortunately, a few such things did come to mind.

“Yes, you aren’t the type that would, Araragi-kun. I know you well enough to know that. I’m just saying you need to be more watchful of your surroundings. But if you really aren’t getting full of yourself, you must at least be pushing yourself. Listen carefully. Not everything you see is real and not everything you can’t see is real either, Araragi-kun. I recall telling you something similar when we first met. Did you forget?”

“I remember, but this isn’t about me, Oshino. So can we get back to the lost cow? Please tell me how to deal with that snail. How are we supposed to drive it out?”

“I already told you not to think of it in terms of driving it out. You just don’t understand anything. If you keep saying things like that, I expect you will eventually come to regret it. Make sure to take responsibility for what you’ve done once that time comes, okay? Anyway, about the lost cow. It...hm...” Oshino hesitated. “Ha ha. It’s just *so simple* it’s almost hard to say anything. Pretty much anything I could say would end up saving you, Araragi-kun. And I can’t do that. You have to save yourself, Araragi-kun?”

“It’s simple? Really?”

“This is nothing like a vampire. That was a truly rare case. I suppose it isn’t too surprising that you’re a little mixed up with that being your first time...Oh, I know. I suppose the lost cow is a bit similar to the crab Tsundere-chan met.”

“Hmm.”

The crab.

That crab.

“Oh, right. There’s also the issue of Tsundere-chan. Ugh, I hate this. My role is as an intermediary between humans and that side of things, so acting as an intermediary between two people is outside my area of expertise. Ha ha. Hmm, what am I doing? I think I’ve gotten a little too close with you, Araragi-kun. Or rather, I never expected for someone to so readily rely on me or to have to resolve anything over the phone.”

"...Well, this seemed like the simplest method."

It may have been simple, but we still did not like it.

However, the fact remained that we had had no other option.

"I'd rather you didn't contact me so easily. Most of the time when you meet a monster, you aren't going to have someone like me around. Also, this is more of a common sense type of issue and not my normal kind of advice, but you really shouldn't be sending a teenage girl alone to some old ruins of a building where a suspicious man lives."

"Oh, so you're aware that you're suspicious and that you live in the old ruins of a building..."

However, he had a point. Senjougahara had so readily agreed – in fact, she had volunteered herself – that I had been a bit lacking in that kind of consideration.

"But I know you won't do anything to her."

"Normally, I would appreciate the trust, but certain lines need to be drawn. That's what we have rules for. A comfort zone that casually crawls around is something we cannot have. Know what I mean? No matter what, we need a cordoned off area of things that are unacceptable. Otherwise, the territory of what we *can* do just shrinks and shrinks. It's often said that all rules have exceptions, but if it's a rule, it shouldn't have exceptions. Then again, exceptions can't exist without rules. Ha ha. I'm starting to sound like Class Rep-chan."

"Nn..."

He was actually right.

I decided to apologize to Senjougahara afterwards.

“Anyways, it seems Tsundere-chan does not trust me as much as you do, Araragi-kun. She has a tentative trust for me due to your trust, so if something were to happen, the blame would lie with you. Don’t forget that. No, I’m not going to do anything! Really, I’m not! Wah! Put down that stapler, Tsundere-chan!”

“.....”

She still has that stapler?

Well, I suppose habits aren’t usually broken in just a few days.

“Hoo...Now that was a fright. That is one scary tsundere. She really is unequalled when it comes to being a tsundere. Umm, anyway...agh, I hate using phones. It’s so hard to talk.”

“Hard to talk? Oshino, how bad with electronics can you be?”

“While there is that, my point is that while I’m being completely serious on my end, for all I know you could be sipping on a drink and reading a manga. When I think about that, it just seems so empty.”

“You’re surprisingly sensitive...”

I suppose there are people who worry about that kind of thing, though.

“Let’s do it this way. I’ll tell Tsundere-chan what to do about the lost cow, and you just wait there for her.”

“Is this really something I should be hearing second hand?”

“The lost cow itself is a piece of folklore so really all of this is second hand.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was wondering if any kind of ritual is needed like with Senjoughara’s case.”

“Nope. It’s a similar type, but the snail isn’t as much of a problem as the crab. For one, it isn’t a god. If I had to put a name to it, I suppose I would call it a ghost. It’s more of a ghost than a monster or a bizarre phenomenon.”

“A ghost?”

To me, a god, a ghost, a monster, and a bizarre phenomenon were all pretty much the same in this kind of situation, but I could tell the difference was important to Oshino.

But...a ghost?

“A ghost is still a type of monster. The stories of the lost cow are not mainly told in one particular region. They are told all over the country. It’s a rather minor monster and it has various names, but it originated as the snail. Oh, one more thing, Araragi-kun. Hachikuji was a term used to refer to a temple in a bamboo thicket. However, back then the ‘Hachiku’ part was spelled with the kanji for ‘pale’ and ‘bamboo’. Add ‘temple’ to the end, and you get ‘Hachikuji’. If you recall, there are two types of bamboo, hachiku and moso. Now the hachiku variety is pronounced the same as ‘splitting bamboo’ in the phrase ‘with the force of splitting bamboo’, but that doesn’t really have anything to do with this. Now the reason the spelling of Hachiku changed to the kanji for ‘eight’ and ‘nine’ was...well, it was really a sort of play on words. Araragi-kun, are you familiar with the 88 Temples of Shikoku and the 33 Western Temples?”

“Yes, I know that much.”

I can’t believe he had to ask.

“Yes, I suppose even you would know that much. Anyway, if you don’t divide them up between the well-known and less well-known,

you end up with a really long list. In a similar way, some temples were added to the list as ‘89th temples’. Of course, as I said before, Hachiku can be spelled with the kanji for 8 and 9, so that name was given to those temples later to signify that they were extra temples beyond the 88.”

“I see...”

So this has to do with Shikoku.

Wait, I thought Hanekawa said something about Kansai?

“Yes,” said Oshino after I asked about it. “Most of the temples chosen as the ‘89th’ were Kansai temples. In that way, it may seem more like the 33 Western Temples than the 88 Temples of Shikoku. And now we get to the crux of the issue and the beginning of the tragedy. You see, together the kanji for eight and nine can be read as ‘yaku’ which can mean disaster. Now, that isn’t exactly a title you want for your temple, is it?”

“...? Come to think of it, I initially thought it was pronounced ‘yaku’ when I saw her name. But that isn’t what the term really means, right?”

“The meaning came along with it nonetheless. Words can be scary things. That kind of thing can become set whether you intended for it or not. You could call it the ‘soul of the word’, but that’s an idiom I’m sick of because of how often it gets used. Anyway, as that interpretation of the name became more widespread, the title stopped being used. Now, a lot of those ‘89th’ temples were destroyed during the anti-Buddhist sentiments during the Meiji Restoration, so only about a quarter of them still exist. Also, most of

the ones that do exist try to cover up the fact that they were once known as a Hachikuji.”

“...”

His explanation was overly vague and that made it easier to understand, but it also made it seem like I would end up embarrassed if I tried to repeat the information to someone else.

At any rate, that information seemed like something I would not get a single hit for on an internet search engine, so I was conflicted as to how much I should believe.

I decided to take it with a grain of salt.

“If you understand that long history, seeing a name like Hachikuji Mayoi seems oddly meaningful and troubling. The family name and the given name fit too well. It’s like Ooyake no Yotsugi or Natsuyama no Shigeki. Surely you’ve studied the Great Mirror, Araragi-kun. But the given name of Mayoi is still an issue. I mean, it’s so straightforward. It’s just so simple. It makes the entire name seem suspicious. Heh, this would have been a lot easier if you had noticed that right away, Araragi-kun.”

“What do you mean this would have been easier? Also, she...”

Hachikuji was sitting on the bench, obediently waiting for me to finish the conversation. She did not really seem to be listening in, but I was sure she was. After all, we were talking about her.

“She only got the family name of Hachikuji recently. Before that, it was Tsunade.”

“Tsunade? Hehh, Tsunade of all things. All the threads are wrapped together a little *too* tightly. They’re starting to fray. It’s gotten to be

too perfect to say it was just fate. It feels like a plan going off without a hitch when that shouldn't have been possible. Hachikuji and Tsunade...I see, I see. And then Mayoi on top of that. I suppose that is actually the real deal. The true dusk[9]. Hah hah. Honestly now. That's just ridiculous."

Oshino muttered the last part almost absent-mindedly.

It seemed like he was speaking to himself, and yet he was still speaking to me.

"Oh, I suppose it doesn't really matter. This city truly is interesting. It's like a melting pot of all sorts of interesting things. It doesn't look like I'll be able to leave for a while. Anyway, I'll give the details to Tsundere-chan, so you just ask her, okay, Araragi-kun?"

"Oh, okay."

"Although," Oshino said in a teasing tone. I could see that thin smile of his in my mind's eye. "That is of course if Tsundere-chan tells you everything."

And then he hung up.

Oshino was not a man to give parting words.

"Okay, Hachikuji. It looks like we can deal with this."

"From what I heard of that conversation, I do not think I can expect much."

Apparently, she had been listening in.

Although if she had only heard what I had said, she would not know anything of actual importance.

"Leaving that aside, Araragi-san."

“What?”

“I happen to be hungry...”

“.....”

So what?

Don’t say it like you’re beating around the bush about a duty of mine I haven’t fulfilled.

However, I did realize she had a point. Due to the unresolved issue of the snail, we had not let Hachikuji eat any lunch. And Senjougahara had not had lunch either. I realized it was possible Senjougahara had stopped to get something to eat on the way to see Oshino, but I had been inconsiderate of the two of them nonetheless.

I could sometimes forget because my body did not require me to eat all that often.

“Okay, when Senjougahara gets back, we can go get something to eat. Although there only seem to be houses around here... Wait, can you go to places other than your mother’s house?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Oh, that’s good. I suppose Senjougahara would know the closest place to eat. What kind of food do you like?”

“I like any kind of food.”

“I see.”

“Your hand was delicious.”

“My hand is not food.”

“No need to be humble. It truly was delicious.”

“.....”

Since in all likelihood she had truly at least swallowed some of my flesh and blood, that was not something that could be taken as a joke.

She was a cannibal girl.

“By the way, Hachikuji. Is it true that you’ve gone to your mother’s house before?”

“Yes. I do not lie.”

“I see...”

However, she hasn’t gotten lost simply due to it having been a while. It was only after she met the snail that...wait? Why did Hachikuji meet the snail?

There had to be a reason.

There was a reason I had been attacked by that vampire.

Hanekawa and Senjougahara both had their reasons.

In that case, Hachikuji must have had a reason as well.

“Hey, your goal isn’t reaching the destination in and of itself, right? You merely want to do meet your mother.”

“Saying ‘merely’ seems a bit insulting, but more or less.”

“Then can’t you just have her come meet you? Even if you can’t reach the Tsunade household, your mother isn’t trapped in the house, right? Even after a divorce, a parent has the right to see her child.”

That was the knowledge of an amateur.

“Right?”

“That’s impossible. It would be no use,” replied Hachikuji without hesitation. “If I could do that, I would have done so long ago. I cannot even call my mother.”

“Hmm...”

“Visiting my mother is the only option left to me. Even if I can never, ever reach her.”

The way she said it was a bit ambiguous, but I supposed the situation in her household was rather complicated. In fact, at the point that she was heading out on her own into a strange town on Mother’s Day, that should have been obvious. But even so, there had to be a more rational way of dealing with this. For instance, if Senjougahara went off on her own to the Tsunade household and...but that would likely not work either. That kind of direct attack was unlikely to work against a monster. Just like how Senjougahara’s phone had lost its signal when she tried to use the GPS function, Hachikuji’s goal would never be achieved. I had only been able to speak to Oshino over the phone because it had been Oshino and not this Tsunade-san.

After all, monsters were part of the world itself.

Unlike normal living beings, they were connected to the world.

Science alone could not tell you everything about monsters. That was why humans continued to be attacked by vampires in this day and age.

Even if no darkness in the world could not be illuminated, darkness would still exist.

And so, we had no choice but to wait for Senjougahara to arrive.

“I really don’t know anything about monsters. What about you, Hachikuji? Do you know much about ghosts and monsters and things?”

“Nnn...no, not at all,” she replied after an odd hesitation. “I only know about the noppera-bo.”

“Oh, Koizumi Yakumo’s...”

“Najimu[10].”

“I don’t think you want to grow accustomed to it.”

It was of course, the mujina.

I doubt there are many people who didn’t know that, though.

“It’s pretty scary.”

“Yes. But I really don’t know any others.”

“Yeah, that’s how these things are.”

Speaking of monsters, my vampire was really more of a...no, I guess it doesn’t matter.

To humans, it’s pretty much the same thing.

That’s just an issue of the general idea.

The deeper issue is...

“Hachikuji, I don’t really get it. Why do you want to see your mother so much? I honestly don’t see what reason you have.”

“I thought it was normal for a child to want to see her mother. Was I wrong?”

“Well, no...”

She was right.

If there had been some kind of unusual reason, I thought I would be able to find the reason she had met the snail, but it seemed she did not have any real reason. It was just an impulsive and instinctual desire that could not be put in words.

“You live with your parents, right, Araragi-san? That is why you do not understand. There are things about people who lack things that those who do not lack them do not realize. People desire what they lack. If you lived away from your parents, I am sure you would want to see them, Araragi-san.”

“Maybe so.”

It probably was so.

My worries were those of one who lives in luxury.

–Onii-chan, it’s because you’re like this.

“From my standpoint, I am jealous of people like you who have both your parents, Araragi-san.”

“I see...”

“I’m ‘next’ written below ‘sheep’ jealous[11].”

“I see...But you got both of those a bit wrong.”

I wondered what Senjougahara would have said if she heard what Hachikuji was feeling. But I then realized she would likely say nothing. She would not empathize with Hachikuji despite being much, much, much closer to being in the same position.

A crab and a snail.

Those kinds of family issues seemed to lead to that kind of thing.

“From the way you have been speaking, I get the impression that you are not too fond of your parents, Araragi-san. Is that so?”

“Oh, not really. It’s just...”

I trailed off because I suddenly realized that was not something to speak of with a child. However, I had already heard a lot about Hachikuji’s issues, so it would have been wrong to stop just because she was a child.

“I was a really good kid.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Is that so? Then perhaps it isn’t. Lying is a type of dialect, you know?”

“You mean for the villagers of the lying village?”

“I am a villager of the truthful village.”

“I see. Well, anyway, I may not have spoken as ridiculously politely as you, but I was reasonably good at my studies, reasonably good at sports, and I didn’t really do any bad things. Also, I did not pointlessly rebel against my parents like the other boys did. I was thankful that they had raised me.”

“Ohh? Most admirable.”

“I have two little sisters and they were pretty much the same, so we were really a pretty good family. However, I pushed myself a little too hard when it came to the high school entrance exam.”

“Pushed yourself too hard?”

“.....”

She was a surprisingly good listener.

Little comments like that were satisfying for the speaker.

“I forced myself to take the exam for a school well above my level...and I passed.”

“But that is a good thing. Congratulations.”

“No, it was not a good thing. If I had forced myself and it had ended there, everything would have been fine. However, I was unable to keep up. Falling behind in the smart kids’ school is nothing to joke about. Also, everyone who goes there is extremely diligent. People like Senjougahara and me are the exceptions.”

For a mass of diligence like Hanekawa Tsubasa to take time to deal with a student like me, I truly had to have been quite the exception. She just happened to have the excess ability to cover for my lack of ability.

“And then I received a great recoil from how good a kid I had been up until then. There of course wasn’t any specific incident you can point your finger at, and my parents and I try to keep things the same at home, but there is still a wordless awkwardness. And once something like that appears, it has a tendency to stick around. That’s why we’ve ended up being overly considerate of each other. And...”

My sisters.

My two little sisters.

–*Onii-chan, it’s because you’re like this.*

“Because I’m like that, I feel like I’m not growing up. It feels like I will always be a child and never be an adult.”

“A child?” said Hachikuji. “So you’re the same as me.”

“I don’t think I’m the same as you. I mean that even as I grow physically, I will stay the same on the inside.”

“Araragi-san, you have a way of saying very rude things to ladies. I may not look it, but I am one of the most grown kids in my class.”

“It’s true that your chest is quite something.”

“Hah!? You touched it!? When did you touch it!?”

Hachikuji’s eyes opened wide in shock.

Shit, that slipped out.

“Um...when we were fighting.”

“That’s more of a shock than that you punched me!”

Hachikuji held her head in her hands.

It must have been quite a shock indeed.

“Y’know...it wasn’t on purpose. And it was just for an instant.”

“Just for an instant!? Really!?”

“Yeah, and I only touched it about 3 times.”

“Then it wasn’t just an instant! And from the second time on, it had to have been on purpose!”

“Not true. It was just an unfortunate accident.”

“I’ve had my first touch taken from me!”

“Your first touch...?”

Is that really a word being used these days?

Elementary schoolers have come a long way since I was a kid.

“I can’t believe my first touch was before my first kiss. You’ve turned Hachikuji Mayoi into a dirty girl.”

“Oh, right. Hachikuji-chan, I just remembered that I forgot to give you the money I promised you.”

“Please don’t bring that up now!”

Still holding her head in her hands, Hachikuji’s entire body writhed around like she had a paper wasp inside her clothes.

It was quite pathetic.

“C’mon, calm down. It’s still better than having your first kiss be from your father, right?”

“That’s completely normal, though.”

“Then it’s better than having your first kiss be with yourself in the mirror.”

“No girl in the world has done that.”

Yeah.

She was probably right about that.

“Grr.”

Just as I thought she was about to remove her hands from her head, she lunged her snapping jaws out toward my neck. She went for the exact same location the vampire had bitten me over spring break, so a chill went down my spine. I somehow managed to hold Hachikuji back by the shoulders and prevented a tragedy from occurring.

“Grrrrrrr,” she threatened as she tried to bite me.

I was reminded of an enemy character from an old video game (one that was a metal ball connected to a chain) as I tried to pacify her.

“C-calm down, calm down. There’s a good girl.”

“Don’t treat me like a dog! Or is that a roundabout way of calling me a naughty bitch!?”

“If anything, I’d say you’re like a rabid dog.”

Her teeth really were a sight to behold. She could bite down hard enough to reach the bone and, despite the fact that some of them were surely her baby teeth, not a single one was missing or loose. Not only did they look nice, but they were strong too.

“Araragi-san, you have been quite shameless! I haven’t seen a single hint of remorse! Surely you have something to say after touching a girl’s delicate chest!”

“...Thanks?”

“No! I want you to apologize!”

“Yeah, but we were in the middle of a fight. It was clearly a force majeure. In fact, you should be glad it was only your chest. Also, as Hanekawa said, you were at fault for biting me so hard.”

“This isn’t about who was at fault! Even if I was at fault, I still underwent a great shock! A grown man apologizes whether he was wrong or not when faced with a girl who has undergone a shock!”

“A grown man does not apologize,” I said in a low voice. “It lowers the value of his soul.”

“That’s so cool!!”

“Or are you saying you won’t forgive me unless I apologize? Saying you will forgive someone if they apologize isn’t being tolerant when they are not on a lower level than you.”

“You’re criticizing me!? How dare you talk back when you’re the one in the wrong. I truly am mad now. I may be gentle, but if you push me, I’ll turn you into a punching bag!”

“How is that kind?”

“And I won’t forgive you even if you apologize!”

“What does it really matter? It’s not like you lost anything.”

“Ah! Araragi-san, what is with this sudden defiance!? And this isn’t about if I lost anything. Not to mention that they’re still growing, so losing some would be a major problem!”

“They say they grow if you have them massaged.”

“Only guys believe in that kind of superstition!”

“Wow, the world really has become a boring place...”

“What? Araragi-san, you’ve been massaging girls' breasts like crazy based on that superstition? You’re horrible.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t had a single opportunity to do that.”

“Oh, so you’re a virgin.”

“.....”

Does this elementary school girl know what she’s talking about?

I thought elementary schoolers had come a long way, but that’s just too much.

The world’s isn’t boring; it’s horrible...

I may have been lamenting over the trend the younger generation seemed to be displaying, but when I thought about it, I had been aware of that kind of thing when I had been in 5th grade as well. That

was just how one's uncertainty about younger generations tended to be.

"Grr! Grrr! Grrrrrr!"

"Ah, no, s-stop that! You're really gonna hurt me!"

"I was touched by a virgin! I've been defiled!"

"It doesn't matter who touched you!"

"I wanted my first person to be skilled! But instead I got you, Araragi-san! My dream has been destroyed!"

"What kind of fantastic delusions do you have!? I was just starting to feel some guilt and now it's all gone!"

"Grr! Grrrrrrr!"

"Ahh! Enough of this already! Maybe I was right about you being a rabid dog! Damn you and your short bangs and your play bites! I'm going to grope you so hard you stop caring about any firsts or kisses or whatever!"

"Kyaahh!?"

Standing there was a high school boy who had lost control of himself and was approaching an elementary school girl to use his greater strength to sexually harass her. I want to believe that he was not me.

He was, of course.

Luckily, Hachikuji Mayoi put up a much stronger resistance than I had expected, so I merely ended up with bite marks and claw marks all across my body and our exchange did not reach its ultimate destination. For five minutes afterwards, an elementary school girl

and high school boy sat wordlessly on a bench, breathing heavily and dripping with sweat.

I was thirsty, so I started looking around to see if there was a nearby vending machine.

“I’m sorry...”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too...”

We both apologized.

It was a shabby compromise.

“You seem surprisingly used to fighting, Hachikuji.”

“I often fight at school.”

“In scuffles like that? Oh, that’s right. In elementary school, it doesn’t really matter if you’re a boy or a girl. But that still makes you pretty rough for a girl...”

And yet she had such an intelligent-looking face.

“You seem pretty used to fighting yourself, Araragi-san. I guess this kind of battle is pretty common for a high school delinquent.”

“I’m not a delinquent. I just can’t keep up in school.”

Correcting that kind of difference seemed pointless.

I basically hurt myself in doing so.

“It’s a college-prep school, so you don’t end up being a delinquent just because you can’t keep up. In fact, we don’t even have a delinquent group.”

“But in manga and such, the student council presidents of elite schools are stereotypically quite bad in secret. The smarter they are, the more vicious a delinquent they make.”

“That’s one of those stereotypes that ignores reality. I’m just used to that kind of scuffle due to my little sisters.”

“Oh, your little sisters. You said you have two, right? Are they about the same age as me?”

“No, they’re both in middle school. But mentally, they might be more on your level. They’re quite young mentally.”

Of course, even they don’t bite me.

One of them practices karate, so our fights can get quite serious.

“They might get along well with you. It isn’t that they like kids; it’s more like they’re kids themselves. I could introduce you to them if you like.”

“No, that’s okay.”

“Oh. For how well-mannered you speak, you’re pretty shy. There’s nothing wrong with that, though. ...I suppose this kind of fight usually does end when one side apologizes.”

Today’s fight was one of willpower.

It too would end once I apologized.

And I knew it.

“Is something the matter, Arararagi-san?”

“This time, you doubled the other ra.”

“Sorry, I bit my tongue.”

“No, that was on purpose.”

“I bitw my tonwgue.”

“It wasn’t on purpose!?”

“It can’t be helped. Everyone says things wrong sometimes. Or have you said everything perfectly from the moment you were born, Araragi-san?”

“I can’t say I’ve done that, but I know I don’t say people’s names wrong.”

“Then say Namamumi Namamome Namamamamo[12] three times fast.”

“You’re not even saying it right.”

“Ah, namamome sounds so dirty!”

“You’re the one that said it.”

“Ah, namamamamo sounds so dirty!”

“I can’t see how...”

It was quite an enjoyable conversation.

“Y’know, I think namamamamo is actually harder to say than the original term.”

“Namamamama!”

“.....”

All that tongue biting certainly is keeping her busy.

“Anyway, is something the matter, Araragi-san?”

“Not really. I was just feeling a bit down after thinking about how to apologize to my sisters.”

“What are you apologizing for? Groping their chests?”

“I wouldn’t grope my sisters.”

“So Araragi-san will grope an elementary school girl but not his sisters? I see. So that’s where you draw the line.”

“Ohh? You have guts to say that. That’s an excellent example of taking something out of context to slander someone.”

“I didn’t take it out of context.”

Really, she hadn’t. In fact, I had built up the perfect context for her, so I felt I probably needed to give quite an apology.

“Let me rephrase it then. So Araragi-san will grope an elementary school girl but not a middle school girl.”

“This Araragi-san you speak of seems to be quite the lolicon. He’s certainly the type I wouldn’t want to be friends with.”

“You seem to be implying that you are not a lolicon.”

“That’s because I was.”

“From what I have heard, a true lolicon does not view himself as a lolicon. This is because he sees the innocent little girls as fully grown women.”

“Now that’s a useless piece of trivia...”

Information you would never need to know was just a waste of space in your brain.

Also, that was not something I wanted to be taught by an elementary school girl.

“In any case, I do not see why them being your sisters would prevent an accident from occurring in a fight.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. My sisters' breasts don’t count as breasts. They count even less than an elementary school girl’s. Just think of it like that.”

“So that is the way of the breast. I will use the knowledge well.”

“Please don’t use that knowledge. Ever. Anyway, we had a bit of an argument when I left today. It wasn’t a physical fight. It was an argument. I think I need to apologize even though I didn’t do anything wrong. If I do, this will all be over. I know that’s what I have to do.”

“Indeed it is,” agreed Hachikuji with a sage look on her face. “My parents would always fight. Not physical fights, but arguments.”

“So that’s why they got divorced.”

“I may just be their daughter, but it seems they originally got along very well. Before they got married, it seems they were madly in love with each other. However, I have never seen them getting along. They always did nothing but fight.”

Even so, Hachikuji had not thought they would get divorced.

In fact, she had never even considered it. She had assumed families stayed together forever. She had not even known such a thing as divorce existed.

She had not known that her parents would split up.

“But that is completely normal. People argue and they fight. They snap at each other, fall in love with each other, and grow to hate each other. All of that is completely normal. That is why they should have worked a little harder to continue to love what they loved.”

“Work to continue to love what they loved? I won’t go as far as to say that’s dishonest, but it certainly doesn’t seem innocent. You make it sound like love is something that simply requires hard work.”

“But Araragi-san,” said Hachikuji without giving in. “The emotion we call love is a very proactive thing.”

“I suppose so.”

She was right.

Perhaps it *was* something you had to put hard work into.

“Growing tired of or growing to hate things you love is a painful thing. It’s a boring thing. Normally, if your love for something is at a 10, your hate for it will be at a 20 once you develop a hatred for it. That is just so sad.”

“You love your mother, don’t you?” I asked Hachikuji.

“Yes, I love her. Of course, I love my father as well. I understand how he feels and I understand that this is not how he wanted things to end up. Due to everything, my father had it tough. Even if he only had to be the Daikokuten for one family.”

“Was your father one of the Seven Gods of Fortune...?”

Her father had been a great person.

That had to have made many things difficult.

“My parents fought and eventually broke up, but I love both of them.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“And that is why I am worried.”

The way Hachikuji cast her gaze down really did make her look worried.

“My father seems to have truly come to hate my mother. He will not let me see her. He will not let me call her and he said I must never see her again.”

“.....”

“I am worried that if I never see her again, I will forget about my mother and cease to love her.”

And that was why.

That was why she had come all the way to this city.

She had no real reason.

She simply wanted to see her mother.

“...A snail, hm?”

Honestly, why can’t a small wish like that be granted?

What’s wrong with it?

I may not have known much about monsters or the lost cow, but I kept wondering why that snail would get in Hachikuji’s way.

She could not reach her destination.

She could only continue to wander.

...Hm?

Come to think of it, Oshino said the lost cow is similar to Senjougahara’s crab. What did that mean? That crab was not trying to bring calamity to Senjougahara. It ended up doing just that, but that was only because, in a way, Senjougahara had wanted that.

The crab granted Senjougahara's wish.

If this is similar, what does that mean? What if the snail Hachikuji met is not trying to keep her from her goal?

What if it is trying to grant her wish?

But then what is the snail doing?

What does Hachikuji Mayoi desire?

Looking at it like that, it almost seems like Hachikuji does not want to have the lost cow driven out.

"....."

"Oh, is something the matter, Araragi-san? Why are you staring at me like that? You're going to make me blush."

"Oh...it's just that..."

"If you fall for me, you will only get burned."

"...What kind of line is that?"

My number of meaningless ellipses was increasing.

"As you can see, I am a cool biz, so that kind of cool line just sounds good coming from me."

"It's obvious you meant to say 'cool beauty', but other than that, I'm not sure what to point out first. Actually, if you're 'cool' then why would I get burned?"

"Hm, you have a point," said Hachikuji with a serious expression. "In that case, if you fall for me, you will only get low-temperature burned."

"....."

“That was really lame!”

“And it’s still too hot to be ‘cool’.”

It made it sound like she was the temperature of a hot-water bottle.

It made her sound like a really good person.

“Oh, I know. I just have to think outside the box. Araragi-san, what I need to do is change my catchphrase from ‘cool’ to something else. The title of a cool woman just isn’t working out. I need to cut my losses and change it.”

“I see. Yes, if you do that, you will be getting closer to something like a catchphrase. In fact, that’s pretty much the standard way of doing it. It’s about as common as the title page of a manga’s second chapter already saying it’s popular. Okay, let’s test this out. You’re switching out ‘cool’, so...”

“I’ll call myself a hot girl.”

“That’s a relief[13].”

“That makes me sound like a good person!”

Just as she made that over the top reaction, Hachikuji seemed to realize something.

“Araragi-san, you’re trying to change the subject.”

So she’s finally seen through me.

“Araragi-san, we were talking about why you were staring at me. Don’t tell me you really have fallen for me.”

“.....”

She hasn’t seen through me at all!

“I don’t really like having people stare at me, but I do have to admit that my upper arm is quite attractive.”

“That’s oddly specific.”

“Oh, you don’t feel anything? Even when you look at *this* upper arm? Can’t you see the beauty of its shape?”

“Your body has a beautiful shape?”

A healthy beauty maybe.

“Oh, you’re hiding your embarrassment. You can be surprisingly cute, Araragi-san. Hm, I need to give you a proper understanding of this. If you like, you can keep that understanding. Perhaps I will give out numbered tickets.”

“Sorry, but I have no interest in a shorty like you.”

“Shorty!”

Hachikuji stared at me with eyes that looked like they were about to pop out of her head.

Then her head started wobbling like she had anemia.

“What an insulting term... It’s so horrible that they should ban it in the near future...”

“You actually might have a point there.”

“I’m hurt. I was telling the truth when I said I was one of the most grown kids in my class! Honestly, you say some horrible things, man-beast.”

“Man-beast? Did you just now remember that? And I think that needs banning first.”

“Then I’ll change it to man-like beast.”

“That makes it sound like I’m not actually human!”

As someone who had been attacked by a vampire and was now half-immortal, that was not really something to joke about. It was a little too on the nose.

“Fine, fine. We just have to think outside the box again, Araragi-san. In this case, we have to change the terms to foreign words. When terms offend people, they will inevitably be banned. However, once the Japanese word is banned, a foreign one can be used to continue on.”

“I see. It’s true that a foreign word tends to have a softer nuance to it. It’s like how lolicon sounds a lot better than pedophile. Okay, let’s try it. If we change them to English, shorty and man-beast become...”

“Shortness and the Human Beast.”

“Damn! I think we’re on the verge of a new era here!”

“Yes! The scales have fallen from my eyes!”

We were quite the painful duo.

“Anyway, I’ll take back calling you shorty. ...In fact, you really are quite something for a fifth grader.”

“Are you talking about my chest?”

“I’m talking about all of you. But even so, you’re still not quite grown enough to be considered past the elementary school level. You’re not some super elementary schooler or anything.”

“I see. I suppose from a high schooler’s perspective, an elementary schooler like me would seem quite slider.”

“It’s true that you would probably corner well.”

I was not about to say it outright, but she was quite well grown.

And I'm fairly sure she meant to say slender, not slider.

"So Araragi-san, why were you looking at me with such passionate eyes?"

"I was just...wait, passionate?"

"If you look at me like that, it makes my diaphragm pound."

"That's the hiccups."

That was a difficult set up.

She may have been testing my ability as the straight man.

"Anyway, it was nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yeah...I suppose."

Was it actually the opposite?

Despite what she says, deep down does she actually not want to see her mother? Or does she really want to but is afraid her mother will reject her? Maybe her mother has already told her not to come see her. From what she's told me of the situation regarding her family, that seems plausible.

If that was the case, the situation would not be easily resolved.

I would have thought so even if I did not have Senjougahara's example as reference.

"...I detect the scent of another girl."

Senjougahara Hitagi appeared out of the blue.

She had entered the park on my mountain bike.

She's already gotten used to riding it. She sure is skillful.

"O-oh, that was fast, Senjougahara."

Getting back had taken her less than half the time it had taken her to get there.

It had been so sudden I did not even have time to be surprised.

"I made a few wrong turns on the way there."

"Yeah, that cram school is surprisingly hard to find. I guess I really should have drawn a map."

"I am a bit embarrassed after the boasting I did."

"Oh, right. All that about your memory..."

"And now you have shamed me, Araragi-kun. You must be a truly horrible person to gloat like that."

"I didn't do anything! This was your own fault!"

"I was not aware that you were the type to be aroused by embarrassed girls, Araragi-kun. I will forgive you, though. For a healthy boy, that much is to be expected."

"No, I think that would be decidedly unhealthy!"

When I thought about it, I recalled that Oshino had said something about a barrier around the location of the cram school, so maybe I really should have been the one to go.

However, Senjougahara Hitagi was boldly playing the role of the embarrassed party. I doubted she was actually embarrassed though. After that comment about being aroused by embarrassed girls, I was the embarrassed one.

“I will accept you, Araragi-kun. I will put up with whatever you would do to me.”

“Don’t all of a sudden pretend to be the exact opposite of your usual character! It won’t do you any good! The range of your character can’t expand any further than it already has! And if you were actually doing this for my sake, you should instead warn me whenever I do anything even slightly unhealthy!”

“It is true that I was not doing it for your sake, Araragi-kun.”

“I knew it!”

“As long as it is amusing, I am fine with it.”

“Now that’s more like it!”

“Also, Araragi-kun, to be honest, taking a few wrong turns is only one of the reasons I took so long getting there. I also stopped and ate some lunch.”

“I was right. You really aren’t one to betray expectations, are you? Well, that’s fine. It’s your decision.”

“I ate enough for you as well.”

“Oh, I see. ...Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I detect the scent of another girl.” After the slightest possible response to my thanks, Senjougahara returned to her original line. “Was someone else here?”

“Um...”

“From the scent...I’d say it was Hanekawa-san.”

“Eh? You can tell?”

I was honestly surprised.

I had thought she was merely guessing.

“By scent...do you mean makeup? But I don’t think Hanekawa was wearing makeup...”

She had been in her school uniform after all. Knowing her, she probably restricted herself even from lip balm while wearing it. When wearing that uniform, Hanekawa would never even accidentally break school rules. She was like a soldier wearing a military uniform.

“I am referring to the scent of her shampoo. Hanekawa-san is the only one in our class that uses that brand.”

“Eh, really? Girls can tell that kind of thing?”

“To a certain extent,” said Senjougahara as if it should have been obvious. “Just think of it as the same as how you can tell girls apart from the shape of their hips and ass.”

“I do not recall ever using a power like that!”

“Eh? You can’t do that?”

“Don’t act so surprised!”

“But don’t you remember what you said to me the other day? ‘You have excellent child-bearing hips, so you will surely have healthy children. Ueh heh heh heh.’”

“That’s just a pervert!”

Also, it would take something extraordinary indeed to make me laugh in such a disturbing way. Not to mention the fact that she did not have excellent child-bearing hips.

“So Hanekawa-san was here.”

“.....”

I was afraid.

I wanted to run away.

“Yes, she was. She already left, though.”

“Did you call her here, Araragi-san? Come to think of it, she lives around here. Did you call her to help guide us?”

“No, I didn’t call her. She just happened to pass by. Just like you.”

“Hmm. Just like me, you say?”

Just like me.

Senjougahara repeated that part.

“I suppose that is just how coincidences are. When one occurs, more are likely to come. Did Hanekawa-san say anything?”

“About what?”

“About anything.”

“...Not really. She just said a few words, rubbed Hachikuji’s head and headed off to the library...no, it wasn’t to the library. She headed off somewhere though.”

“Rubbed her head...hm? I see. Well, I guess that isn’t too surprising with Hanekawa-san.”

“You mean that she likes kids? Unlike you.”

“It is true that Hanekawa-san is quite unlike me. Yes, she isn’t like me. Not like me at all. Now, excuse me, Araragi-kun.”

Senjougahara then brought her face in close to mine. For an instant, I wondered what she was doing, but it turned out she was smelling me. Or rather, she was smelling...

“Hmm.”

She backed away.

“It does not seem you had a love scene here.”

“...What? Were you checking to see if Hanekawa and I had embraced? Can you tell how strong the scent is too? That’s amazing.”

“That is not all. I now have your scent memorized, Araragi-kun. You should assume I am monitoring your actions at all times from now on.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that...”

I doubted a normal human could actually pull that off though. Even if Senjougahara did have a stronger than usual sense of smell, it seemed unlikely.

Wait, did Hachikuji’s smell not rub off on me during our two fights? Senjougahara was there during the first one, so she should know even if I don’t mention it. Maybe Hachikuji uses a scentless shampoo. Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter.

“So did Oshino tell you everything we need to know, Senjougahara? Hurry up and tell me what we have to do to get her to her destination.”

To be honest, Oshino’s last words had stuck with me.

–That is of course if Tsundere-chan tells you everything.

That had led to me being a little forceful as I asked her. Hachikuji was looking up at Senjougahara with a worried expression.

Finally, Senjougahara said, “It seems we had it backwards, Araragi-kun. Oshino-san says there is something I must apologize to you about.”

“Hah? Why are you changing the subject? You really are skilled at altering the direction of a conversation. What do you mean we had it backwards? And what do you have to apologize for?”

“To borrow Oshino-san’s words,” continued Senjougahara nonetheless. “Even if there is only one proper truth, a different conclusion can be reached when it is viewed from two different points of view. In those cases, there is no way to determine which point of view is correct. There is no way to prove that you are right.”

“.....”

“But it is still wrong to simply assume you are wrong. He really has a way of seeing right through you. I hate it.”

“What are you talking about? Or rather, what was Oshino talking about? I don’t see what that has to do with this situation.”

“It seems the way to free oneself from the snail – from the lost cow – is quite simple, Araragi-san. If you explain it in words, it is almost too simple. Oshino-san said you are lost because you go with the snail. As such, you will no longer be lost if you leave the snail.”

“You are lost...because you go with the snail?”

It was so simple that I did not understand. It seemed like there should be more to it. In fact, it sounded as if Oshino missed the mark in a few places. I looked over at Hachikuji, but she showed no reaction. However, her tightly sealed lips made it seem that Senjougahara’s words had had some kind of effect with her.

She said nothing.

“No exorcism or supplication is necessary. This isn’t a case of possession or interference. It is the same as with my crab. And in the case of this snail, the target is actually the one that approached the monster. It is not something done subconsciously or preconsciously. It is something done of the target’s own conscious will. The target is merely sticking with the snail. The target is following the snail of his own free will. That is why he is lost. So Araragi-kun, you merely need to leave the snail.”

“Um, it’s not me. It’s Hachikuji. And that doesn’t make sense. Hachikuji doesn’t want to follow the snail. There’s no way she does.”

“As I said, we had it backwards.”

Senjougahara’s tone did not change. It was her usual flat voice. I could not read any emotion in it.

No emotion showed on her face.

However, she somehow seemed in a bad mood.

In a very bad mood.

“The monster known as the lost cow does not make one unable to reach one’s destination. It makes one unable to return *from* one’s destination.”

“R-return from?”

“It blocks one’s return path rather than one’s path there.”

It isn’t on the way there. It’s on the way back?

Returning...to where?

To your home?

Your visit and...your arrival?

“Eh? But that doesn’t make sense. I mean it makes sense on its own, but Hachikuji isn’t trying to return home. She’s only trying to reach the Tsunade household.”

“And that is why I must apologize to you, Araragi-kun. But at least let me explain why I did it. I meant no harm and I did not know what I was doing. I merely assumed that *I*was wrong.”

“.....”

I had no idea what she meant.

But I could tell it had some horribly important meaning.

“But can you blame me? For over 2 years, I was not normal. I only returned to normal just last week. It is only natural that I assumed I was wrong when something happened.”

“Um, Senjougahara?”

“Just like with my crab, the lost cow only appears before those with a reason. And that is why it appeared before you, Araragi-kun.”

“I already told you, the snail appeared to Hachikuji, not me.”

“Hachikuji-chan, was it?”

“.....”

“Araragi-kun, things were awkward on Mother’s Day, you had a fight with your sisters, and now you do not want to return home. The thing about this Hachikuji-chan is...”

Senjoughara pointed at Hachikuji.

Or I assume that’s what she intended to do.

She was actually pointing in the completely wrong direction.

“I cannot see her.”

In shock, I looked over at Hachikuji.

She was a small, intelligent-looking girl.

Her bangs were short enough to see her eyebrows and she had pigtails.

She also had a large backpack on her back.

She somehow looked a bit like a snail.

Mayoi Snail - 007

Once upon a time...well, it wasn't that long ago. It was only about 10 years ago. Anyway, at that time the end approached for a certain couple's relationship. One husband and one wife. That made two. At one time, everyone around them had been jealous of them and no one around them had doubted that they would live happily ever after. However, in the end, their marriage turned out to be a short one. It did not last even 10 years.

I do not think it was an issue of right and wrong.

That course of events is fairly normal.

The couple had a young daughter. That was normal as well. As a result of an argument I cannot bear to repeat, that daughter was taken in by her father.

At the end of those long, drawn out issues, the couple's relationship did not merely come to an end. It utterly failed. If they had continued to live in the same house for another year, they might have even tried to kill each other. At the end, the mother was made by the father to swear she would never let the daughter see her again. It did not matter what the law had to say.

She was half forced to swear that.

However, the daughter had a thought.

Was she truly forced?

The daughter was also made to swear by the father that she would never see her mother again. And that daughter had a thought. The mother had come to hate the father who she had surely loved so

much before. As such, was it possible that she had come to hate herself? Otherwise, why would she have sworn that? Even if it was half forced, what about the other half? But at the same time, the daughter had said the same thing herself. She too had sworn to never meet her mother again.

That was it.

Just because she was her mother.

Just because she was her daughter.

That did not mean their relationship would last forever.

Whether they had been forced or not, those words could not be taken back once they had been sworn. The daughter had been taught that it was shameless to refer to one's own actions in the passive voice. She had been taught that by none other than her mother.

She was then taken in by her father.

She was made to abandon her mother's family name.

However, those feelings faded.

Even the sadness faded.

After all, time was equally kind to everyone.

It was so kind it was cruel.

Time passed and the daughter aged from 9 to 11.

The daughter was shocked.

She realized that she could no longer recall her mother's face. No, it was not that she could not recall it. She was perfectly able to do that. However, she was no longer sure that the person she saw in her mind's eye was her mother.

It was the same when she looked at photos.

She was no longer sure that the woman in the photos she kept in secret were really of her mother.

Time.

Time would make any feeling fade.

It would degrade any feeling.

And so...

The daughter headed out to meet her mother.

It was the second Sunday of May of that year.

It was Mother's Day.

Of course, she did not tell her father of this. Nor did she contact her mother ahead of time. The daughter had no idea what situation her mother was in.

What if her mother hated her?

What if her mother felt she was a nuisance?

Or what if her mother...had forgotten her?

That would be quite a shock.

To be completely honest, the daughter did not tell anyone – even her friends – about visiting her mother so that she could choose to abandon the plan and head back home up to the very last second.

And so she headed off to visit her mother.

She neatly bound her own hair and filled her favorite backpack full of old memories hoping to delight her mother with them. As she

headed out, she gripped a memo with the address written on it in her hand to make sure she did not get lost.

However, the daughter never arrived.

She never arrived at her mother's house.

Why?

Why?

Really, truly...why?

The light had been green...

"That daughter was me," explained Hachikuji Mayoi.

Or perhaps it was more a confession than an explanation.

That apologetic expression and the way she looked like she could break down into tears at any time left no other word in my mind.

Senjougahara watched.

Senjougahara's expression did not change.

She truly did not show her emotions on her face.

Surely she felt something in that situation.

"So you've been lost and wandering ever since?"

Hachikuji gave no response.

She did not even look at me.

"The one who did not reach her destination now prevents others from making their way back home. Oshino-san did not say so, but I am guessing she is something like a ghost haunting a specific area. That explanation should be good enough for amateurs like us. The

way there and the way back. There and back. A pilgrimage back and forth. That is what Oshino said Hachikuji is.”

The lost cow.

That was why it was the cow that was known as *lost* and not something that led others astray.

That was why that was the only thing it could be called.

The monster itself was lost.

“But...what about the snail?”

“Listen,” Senjougahara said as if lightly admonishing me. “She must have become a snail after dying. Oshino did not specifically say anything about haunting a specific area, but he did say she was a ghost. I suppose that is what he must have meant.”

“But then...”

“But I think that is exactly why she is not like a normal ghost. She is different from what we normally think of as a ghost. And she is different from the crab as well.”

“But...”

But it made sense. Just as it was called a cow but was not actually a cow, it being called a snail did not necessarily mean it was in the form of a snail. She had taken on the essence of a monster by mistake.

The name represents the body.

The essence of what it is.

–Not everything you see is real and not everything you can’t see is real either, Araragi-kun.

Hachikuji Mayoi

Hachikuji the Lost.

The word Mayoi meaning lost originated from the idea of the warp and the weft becoming frayed together. That was why one kanji for Mayoi had the thread radical in it and was used to refer to a strong delusion that prevented the dead from resting in peace. Also, the second kanji spelling Mayoi in her name referred to any evening hour but especially those of dusk or what was known as twilight. If you added the first kanji from her name, the one that meant true, you ended up with a rare case of it being used as a negative prefix. In that case, what looked like “true dusk” was actually an archaic term used to refer to 2 AM. Yes, the same time known as the Time of Three Oxes. From there, you were only a step or two away from cow or snail.

But...then...it’s just like Oshino said...

It’s so...straightforward.

“Can you really not see Hachikuji? I mean, she’s right here.”

I forcibly grabbed Hachikuji’s shoulders as she hung her head down. I then turned her toward Senjougahara. Hachikuji Mayoi was right there. I was touching her. I could feel the warmth of her body. I could feel how soft she was. When I looked at the ground, I could see her shadow. When she bit you, it hurt.

When you spoke with her, it was fun.

“I cannot. Nor can I hear her.”

“But before you were...”

No, wait.

She hadn’t.

Even at the very beginning, she had said “I cannot see that”.

“Araragi-kun, what I saw was you muttering by yourself over by the sign and finally performing some kind of wild pantomime. I had no idea what you were doing. However, once I asked you...”

Once she asked...

I had explained it all to her.

Oh, that’s right. So that’s why she didn’t take the memo with the address on it when I tried to hand it to her.

She couldn’t see it.

For her, it wasn’t there.

“But why didn’t you say something?”

“Like I said, I couldn’t say anything. I just couldn’t. When you were seeing something I could not, I naturally assumed that I was the one that was wrong.”

“.....”

For over 2 years, the girl known as Senjougahara Hitagi had had a monster with her.

The thought process of assuming she was the strange one or assuming she was the one with something wrong was very strongly rooted in her. Any person that met a monster even once tended to carry that with them for the rest of their life, for better or for worse. Usually for the worse. Once you knew that kind of thing existed in the world, it was impossible to pretend otherwise even against something powerless.

But that was why Senjougahara had done what she did. She had finally been freed from her problem, so she did not want to think that something was wrong with her once more. Nor did she want *me* to think something was wrong with her once more. And so she pretended to see Hachikuji despite not being able to.

She followed my lead.

So that's what happened...

That had been why Senjougahara had seemed to ignore Hachikuji so much. She had been literally unable to see her. And that was also why Hachikuji had hid behind my legs to avoid Senjougahara.

Senjougahara and Hachikuji had not exchanged a single word.

"Senjougahara, is that also why you volunteered to go to Oshino's place?"

"I wanted to ask him what was going on. When I did ask, he rebuked me...or was he just shocked? No, maybe he laughed."

It was true that the idea seemed almost laughable.

It was so ridiculous, I was actually unable to laugh at it.

"So...*I* was the one that met the snail."

First I met a demon...and then a snail.

Oshino had even said that at the beginning.

"It seems monsters that take the form of children – especially little girls – are quite common. I have even seen examples in our Japanese textbook. A kimono-wearing ghost that leaves travelers stranded in the mountains. A girl that joins in playing with other children without the children noticing and takes one away with her after they are

done playing. I merely knew too little to have heard of the lost cow. Araragi-kun, Oshino-san said that the condition to meet the lost cow is to not wish to return home. That desire is one that – to be a bit pessimistic – everyone has at some point or another. Everyone has issues at home."

"...Ah!"

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She had been the same.

Due to the discord and distortion at her home, Sunday was her day for taking a walk.

She had the same desire as me. In fact, she might have desired it even more than I did.

That was why Hanekawa had been able to see Hachikuji.

She had seen her, touched her, and spoken with her.

"A monster that gives you what you desire..."

"When you put it like that, it does sound nice. However, you could also say that it takes advantage of our human weaknesses. For instance, I doubt you truly wished you would never return home, Araragi-kun. That is why I think it should be called a reason rather than a desire."

"....."

"But, Araragi-kun, that is why the way of dealing with the lost cow is exceedingly simple. I already told you, remember? You just have to stop following it. You have to leave it. That is all."

You follow it of your own free will and get lost.

It made sense. If you followed the snail that would never arrive anywhere, there was no way you could ever return home.

If you explained it in words, it was so simple.

You just had to leave the park exactly as Hanekawa had.

If you left, you could leave.

Only those who went with her could not leave.

Even if people said they did not want to return home, they had nowhere to return but home.

“It is not all that terrible a monster, nor is it all that powerful. It causes no major harm. That is what Oshino-san said. The lost cow is nothing more than a slight prank, a slight mystery. And so...”

“So?” I asked, cutting her off.

I could not bear to hear any more.

“So what, Senjougahara?”

“.....”

“That isn’t it. That isn’t it at all. I understand what you’re saying, Senjougahara. It nicely resolves the odd feeling all of this gave me. But that isn’t what I wanted to ask Oshino about. I’m grateful for everything he told us, but that isn’t what I truly wanted to know. That isn’t why I had you go all the way to see him.”

“Then what did you want to know?”

“I wanted...” My hands holding Hachikuji’s shoulders tightened. “I wanted to learn how to get Hachikuji to her mother’s place. That’s all. From the very beginning, that was all I wanted. I don’t care about

all that useless knowledge. All that trivia is a waste of space in my brain. All of that isn't what's important."

It was not about Araragi Koyomi.

It was all about Hachikuji Mayoi.

It was not an issue where I could just leave her and be done with it.

I could not leave her no matter what.

"Don't you understand, Araragi-kun? She is not actually there. She does not actually exist. This Hachikuji...Hachikuji Mayoi-chan, was it? She is already dead. She is no longer normal. She has not been possessed by a monster. She *is* the monster."

"So what!?" I shouted.

I shouted at Senjougahara.

"She's not normal? Who is!?"

"....."

You, me...and Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Nothing lasts forever.

And yet...

"O-ow, that hurts, Araragi-san."

Hachikuji struggled helplessly in my arms. As my grip had strengthened, my nails seemed to have dug into her shoulders.

It seemed to hurt her.

And so she spoke.

"U-um, Araragi-san. That Senjougahara-san is right. I...I..."

"You be quiet!"

No matter what she said, it would not reach Senjougahara.

It would only reach me.

However, in that voice that could only reach me, she had even tried to tell me she was the lost snail from the very beginning.

She had tried her best to tell me.

And she had said something else.

The very first thing she had said to me.

“You couldn’t hear it, Senjougahara, so I’ll tell you. The first thing she said to both me and Hanekawa was quite something.”

Please do not talk to me.

I hate you.

“Do you understand, Senjougahara? She does not want anyone to follow her, so she has to say that to everyone she meets. Do you understand how that must feel? Even when someone tries to rub her head, she has to bite their hand. I can’t imagine how that must feel.”

She could not rely on anyone else.

She could not say that she was the monster.

She could not say that she was the strange one.

She simply could not.

“But even if I can’t, both of us have still experienced similar things. It may not be exactly the same, but we know what it is like to be all alone and to not know what to do. Even if it isn’t exactly the same, we have felt the same pain. I became immortal and you had your body altered by a monster. So I don’t care about this lost cow crap or this snail crap. Even if she says it herself, it changes nothing. You

can't see her or hear her or even smell her, but that is why it is my duty to see her safely to her mother's place."

"...I thought you would say that."

Shouting at Senjougahara had been completely illogical and my head had gradually been cooling ever since I had begun, so I was aware what I was saying was ridiculous. However, Senjougahara's expression had not changed in the slightest.

"I have finally seen the real you, Araragi-kun."

"...Eh?"

"It seems I was mistaken about you. No, maybe I wasn't. I vaguely – or perhaps strongly – knew this already, but I had an illusion covering it. That illusion has disappeared. Araragi-kun, last Monday, my slight mistake led to you learning of my problem. And within the same day, you called out to me."

I had called out to Senjougahara, telling her I might be able to help her.

"To be honest, I was unable to work out the meaning of that action. Why had you done that? After all, you gained nothing from it. You had no stake in saving me, so why? I wondered if perhaps you had done it because it was me."

"....."

"But that was not why. That seems clear now. Araragi-kun, you will simply save anyone."

"Save? That's too strong a word. Don't exaggerate. Anyone would have done the same. And as you said before, I just so happened to have had a similar problem and happened to know Oshino, so..."

“Even if you had not had a similar problem and even if you had not known Oshino-san, you would have done the same thing, wouldn’t you have? From what Oshino-san told me, you would have.”

What did that bastard tell her?

I’m betting it was some kind of half-truth.

“At the very least, I do not think I would go up and talk to a strange elementary school student just because I saw her in front of a map twice.”

“.....”

“When you are alone for so long, you begin to think you are special. When you are alone, you are indeed not a part of the masses. However, you are merely not a part of them. That does not make you special. It’s almost laughable. Plenty of people learned of my problem in the two years after I met that monster, but the only one that actually did anything about it was you, Araragi-kun. You were the only one that was like you.”

“Well, no one else is me.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Senjougahara gave a slight smile.

Also, while she had likely only just so happened to get the angle right, Senjougahara Hitagi looked directly at Hachikuji Mayoi.

“I have one last message from Oshino-san. He predicted that you would say what you did, so – because he claims to be very, very kind – he gave me a secret trick to use for this situation.”

“A-a secret trick?”

“He really does see right through us. And yet I cannot tell what that man is thinking at all. Well, let’s go.”

Senjougahara then straddled the mountain bike. Her motion was smooth as if to say the bike was already hers.

“Go? Go where?”

“To the Tsunade household of course. As good citizens, we must see Hachikuji-chan on her way. Come with me. I will lead the way. Oh, and Araragi-kun...”

“What?”

“I love you.”

“.....”

Her tone had not changed even slightly.

.....

After thinking for a few more seconds, I realized I was the first boy in Japan to have a classmate confess her love for him in English.

“Congratulations,” said Hachikuji.

In about every possible way, that comment had been out of place and had missed the mark.

Mayoi Snail - 008

And an hour later, Senjougahara, Hachikuji, and I arrived at the location of the address on that memo. We arrived at the place the girl Hachikuji Mayoi had been in life had headed for on that Mother's Day.

It had taken quite some time.

And yet it had been so easy.

"But...this is..."

However, it did not seem out of place.

The sight before my eyes did not seem out of place.

"Senjougahara, are you sure this is the place?"

"Yes, I am sure."

Her assertion left no room for argument.

This was Hachikuji's mother's house, the Tsunade household.

It had become a completely empty lot.

It was surrounded by a fence and signs saying "Private Property" and "No Unauthorized Entrance" were staked into the bare ground. The rust on the edges of the signs made it clear that they had been sitting there for quite some time.

Land development.

Rezoning.

It had not been turned into a road like Senjougahara's old house, but since no trace of the house remained, it was essentially the same.

"...How could this happen?"

What that shut-in Oshino Meme had suggested as a secret trick for our situation had been something so simple it made you think "Is that all?". Whether you called it the lost cow or the snail, the classification of monster it fell under was a ghost. For that reason, she essentially did not accumulate informational memories.

Apparently, it was standard for that kind of monster to not exist.

She was an existence that did not exist as an existence.

If no one was here to see her, she was not there.

To explain it using what happened today, Hachikuji had suddenly appeared and begun to exist the instant I sat on that park bench and looked over toward the sign. Or so Oshino had said.

In the same way, Hachikuji must have suddenly appeared when Hanekawa had looked on the bench next to me when she passed by the park. As a monster, she did not have a continuous existence. Instead, she appeared the instant she was seen. In that way, the lost cow was not something you "met" in quite the same way as other monsters.

She was only there when someone was looking there. The observer and the observed. Hanekawa would likely have given a detailed and apt analogy from her scientific knowledge, but I could not think of anything appropriate. Senjougahara probably could, but she did not mention it.

At any rate, she had no informational memory. In other words, no knowledge.

She had of course been able to lead someone unfamiliar with the land like me astray, but she had also been able to do so to Senjougahara who could not even see her. She had even been able to cut off the signal of Senjougahara's cell phone. And as a result, the target would forever be lost.

However.

She did not know what she did not know.

And even if she did know, there was nothing she could do about it.

For instance, the rezoning.

The cityscape had changed so much in just the past year, so the differences from 10 years before had to have been quite something. We did not take a shortcut, we did not take some roundabout way, and we did not head straight there.

By choosing a route made up entirely of new roads a monster like the lost cow was unable to deal with it.

Monsters did not age. A little girl monster would always be a little girl.

She would never grow up and be an adult.

–So you're the same as me.

Hachikuji had been in the 5th grade 10 years before, so she should really be older than Senjougahara and me. And yet she spoke of her memories of fighting at school like they had happened yesterday. She truly did not have standard memories.

She did not.

They were simply not there.

And so...

Apparently, Oshino had said it was like putting new wine into old wineskins.

That unpleasant man had seen through to the truth. He could not see Hachikuji, he had not heard that much about our issues, and he did not even know much about this town, and yet he had acted like he knew everything.

Nevertheless, his words had led to our success.

We chose an amidakuji-like path following the newly constructed roads that had the nice dark asphalt. As much as possible, we avoided the old roads or the roads that had merely been newly paved. We even used the road that passed through where Senjougahara's house had been. We finally reached our destination after an hour.

The area should have been only a 10 minute walk from that park and it was probably only 500 meters as the crow files, but it still took us over an hour.

We made it to the destination.

We finally made it.

But it was merely an empty lot.

"I guess everything can't go perfectly..."

Yes.

With how much everything had changed, it would have simply been too perfect for the destination alone to remain unchanged. Even Senjougahara's house had become a road in less than a year. Also, our strategy to get there would have been useless if there had been

no new road right up next to the destination. The possibility of the destination itself having changed should have been obvious from the beginning. But at the same time, having it not go so perfectly seemed to make it all a waste. It felt like it had lost all meaning. If the very end was a failure, it had all been a failure.

I guess not everything goes the way you want it to.

I guess not every dream comes true.

If the destination is gone, won't the lost cow truly be forced to wander forever? Won't she truly be a lost snail that circles around and around and around without end?

How horrible.

Oshino, that bastard with the psychedelic Hawaiian shirt, might have seen this very ending coming. And yet – or perhaps *because* of that – he had...

Oshino Meme had such a frivolous way of speaking. He would never give parting words, he would never give you an answer to a question you did not ask, he would not act unless you asked him to, and he would not necessarily do so even if you did.

He was fine with not saying things he really should have.

"U-uuhh..."

I heard Hachikuji sobbing next to me.

I had barely been able to contain my shock at the sight before me, so I had completely forgotten about Hachikuji. When I should have been concerned with her, I had been lost in thought. I finally turned toward her.

Hachikuji was crying.

However, her head was not hanging down. She was staring forward.

From the angle of her gaze, she seemed to be looking at the house that was no longer there.

“U-uuhh... Ahhh...”

And then...

Hachikuji moved from my side and ran forward.

“I’m home!”

Oshino had likely seen all the way to that ending and would likely say it had been obvious.

He was a man who did not say what he really should.

Honestly, I just wish he had told me from the very beginning.

I wondered what Hachikuji could see now that she had arrived.

Senjougahara and I could only see an empty lot. The area had completely changed, but what did the lost cow, Hachikuji Mayoi, see there?

What had appeared there for her?

Development and alterations to the land meant nothing.

Not even time mattered.

The girl with the large backpack quickly dimmed, grew hazy, thinned, and then suddenly disappeared from my vision.

I could no longer see her.

She was gone.

But the girl had said “I’m home”. That place was no longer her separated mother’s house and it no longer had any connection to

her. It was now nothing but her destination, but she had still said “I’m home”.

It seemed she had arrived home.

I felt that was a lovely end of the story.

A truly lovely end.

“Well done, Araragi-kun. You were fairly cool,” said Senjougahara finally.

Her voice had almost no emotion in it.

“I didn’t really do anything. Really, you were the one that did all the work this time, not me. I wouldn’t have even been able to pull off that secret trick alone. Your knowledge of the area was necessary.”

“That may be true, but that is not what I meant. I was surprised that it had become an empty lot, though. Perhaps the entire family moved when the daughter was killed in a traffic accident on her way to visit. Of course, I can think of plenty of other reasons.”

“Yeah, and come to think of it, we don’t even really know if Hachikuji’s mother is even still alive.”

Or her father for that matter.

I suddenly realized that Hanekawa might have actually known. It had seemed the Tsunade household had perhaps rung a bell with her. If she had known that the house no longer existed for some reason, she was the type to keep silent about it. At the very least, she was not an extreme stickler for the rules.

She was merely fair.

At any rate, the issue seemed to be resolved.

It seemed to have ended much too quickly. I then noticed the Sunday sun beginning to set. It was mid May, and the days were still short. I had to get home soon.

Just like Hachikuji had.

I also realized that it was my turn to make dinner.

“Well, Senjougahara. Let’s head back to get the bike.”

Senjougahara had originally tried to lead us on the mountain bike, but she had quickly realized the uselessness of a mountain bike when travelling with those walking and that it became something she just had to push along as she walked. And so she had left the bike at that park.

“Yes. By the way, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara who was still looking toward the empty lot. “You still have not given me a response.”

“.....”

A response?

For that, you mean?

“Um, Senjougahara. About that...”

“Just so you know, Araragi-kun, I hate romantic comedies where it is obvious the two will get together at the end but lukewarm developments keep them at an in-between more-than-friends-less-than-lovers state chapter after chapter just to keep the story going.”

“...I see.”

“Incidentally, I also hate sports manga where each match takes an entire year and yet you know they are going to win in the end. I also

hate battle manga where it is clear they will defeat the final boss and bring peace to the world, but the battles with weaker enemies go on forever."

"I think you just covered every shounen manga and shoujo manga in existence."

"So what will you do?"

She was not giving me a chance to think.

The atmosphere made it clear I could not evade giving a proper answer. I am betting not even a boy who is confessed to by a girl who has all of her friends around her would feel as oppressive an atmosphere.

"Um, I think you're a bit mistaken, Senjougahara. Or maybe you're being a bit impatient. It is true that I helped to resolve your problem last Monday, but if you act like you owe me some huge favor..."

"Oh, are you perhaps worried about that ridiculous theory that says people are more likely to fall into a romantic relationship in dangerous situations while ignoring human reasoning and giving no thought to the fact that extremely dangerous situations have a way of revealing the true nature of one's comrades?"

"Ridiculous? Well, I suppose you're right. You'd have to be an idiot to confess your love to someone while on some dangerous suspension bridge or something. But I still think you're feeling too much of a debt of gratitude toward me. To be honest, whatever the situation or circumstances were, I don't feel right having you feel so indebted to me."

“That was just a pretext. By giving you the initiative, I hoped to get you to confess to me. That was why I said that. You lost your chance, you foolish boy. That is the last time I will set someone up like that.”

“.....”

Now that was a bold statement.

And is that what she was doing?

Was she trying to tempt me?

“Do not worry. I do not actually feel such a great debt toward you, Araragi-kun.”

“...Is that so?”

Eh?

Are you sure?

“After all, you would save anyone. This morning, I did not have quite as strong a grasp of who you are as I do now, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara smoothly. “It is clear now that you did not save me because it was me, but that does not matter to me. Even if it had not been me that you saved – for example, if you had saved Hanekawa-san and I had only watched on from the sidelines – I believe I would have still felt that you are special. Even if I am not special, knowing that you are special is just so much of a thrill. Well, that might be exaggerating a bit, but if anything, you are certainly fun to speak with, Araragi-kun.”

“But...we haven’t talked all that much yet.”

It was worse than that.

Because of the very concentrated amount of time we had spent together last Monday, last Tuesday, and that Sunday, I almost overlooked the fact that we had only ever spoken on those three days.

It had only been three days.

Even if we had been in the same class for three years...

We were practically strangers.

“That’s right,” said Senjougahara with a nod of agreement. “And that is why I want to speak with you more.”

She wanted to spend more time with me.

So that she could get to know me better.

So that she could fall in love with me.

“I do not think this is anything quite as cheap as love at first sight and I am not patient enough to build up all the necessary groundwork. However, I still feel a desire to put effort into loving you, Araragi-kun.”

“...Is that so?”

When she put it like that, she was right.

I could find nothing to say in return.

You had to work to continue to love someone. Love was a very proactive emotion. In that case, doing things as Senjougahara suggested was fine.

“I believe this is an issue of timing. Merely becoming friends might have been enough, but I am greedy. I only want to go for the absolute extreme. Just think of it as having gotten stuck with a

horrible girl," she said. "It is because you are kind to anyone and everyone that this is happening to you, Araragi-kun. This was your own doing. Oh, and you need not worry. I am perfectly capable of distinguishing between gratitude and certain other feelings. After all, I have imagined all sorts of things involving you over the past week."

"Imagined...?"

"It has been a very fulfilling week."

She had a very blunt way of saying things.

I had to wonder just what I was doing and having done to me in these imaginings of Senjougahara's.

"If you prefer, you can think of it as being unfortunate enough to have caught the eye of an easily love-struck fairy tale maiden who is starved for love and will do anything for anyone who is even slightly kind to her."

"...I see."

"You were unlucky. You should curse your normal actions."

Does she not even hesitate to put herself down?

And after having all that said to me...

Even that...

...God, I'm lame.

I'm just pathetic.

"And Araragi-kun, now that I have said all that..."

"What?"

"If you refuse me, I will kill you and then run away."

“That’s just a normal murder! You need to die too!”

“That’s just how normally serious I am.”

“...Sigh. I see...”

As I thought over what she said, I sighed from the bottom of my heart.

Honestly...

She is quite fun to be around.

It felt like a waste to have spent only those three days of the past three years with her. I, Araragi Koyomi, had wasted so much time.

I was truly glad that I had been the one to catch her back then.

I was so glad that Araragi Koyomi had been the one to catch Senjougahara Hitagi.

“If you cowardly ask for time to think about this, I will forever hold you in contempt, Araragi-kun. You should not embarrass girls any more than is necessary.”

“I know, I know. It might not be my place to do so, but can I add a single condition to this?”

“What would that be? Do you want to watch me shave my excess hair for a week?”

“Of all the things you’ve said so far, that is certainly the worst!”

And that was due to both what she said and when she said it.

After a few seconds, I spoke to Senjougahara.

“I say a condition, but I guess it’s more of a promise...”

“A promise? What would that be?”

“Senjougahara, never, ever again pretend to see something you do not see or pretend not to see something you do see. Never again. If anything seems odd, say so. Don’t try to be considerate. Due to what we’ve experienced and what we know, we will likely have to bear this burden for the rest of our lives. We know of these things’ existence, so promise me you will tell me on the spot if it seems there is a discrepancy in how we view something.”

“I promise.”

Senjougahara had her usual composed face with no readable expression, but I could still sense something from that short, immediate response that could be taken by some as having been made without proper consideration.

It was my own fault.

It was due to the normal actions I took.

“Okay, let’s go. It’s gotten pretty dark, so...um...I guess the normal protocol would be for me to see you home.”

“Two people cannot ride on that bike.”

“It has those rods, so two should be fine even if three would be impossible.”

“Rods?”

“The rods you put your feet on. I don’t know what they’re called, but they’re attached to the back wheel. One of us can stand on them and put their hands on the other’s shoulders. We can decide who sits in front with a game of rock paper scissors. The snail is gone, so we should have no problems returning home. The way we came was way too complicated to remember, so Senjougahara...”

“Wait, Araragi-kun.”

Senjougahara was still standing in the same place.

While standing there, she grabbed my wrist.

Senjougahara Hitagi had restricted herself from coming into contact with others for so long, so that was the first time she had ever reached out and touched me like that.

We touched each other.

We looked at each other.

And that showed that we were there.

We could each tell the other was there.

“Perhaps we should actually put it in words.”

“Put what in words?”

“I do not want an assumed relationship.”

“Oh, that.”

I thought.

For a girl that desired the absolute extreme, merely replying in English would have lacked something. However, my limited knowledge of other languages would have made any other language seem half-hearted and it would still be a rehash.

And so...

“I hope it catches on.”

“What?”

“Senjougahara tore[14].”

In a general sense, that made Hanekawa’s delusion 100% accurate.

It seemed that class rep really did know everything.

Mayoi Snail - 009

This is the epilogue, or rather the conclusion, to this story.

As usual, my two little sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, woke me up. That they came to wake me up showed that my words of apology that were almost an unconditional surrender had been successful and their anger had been quelled. In the end, I had been unable to do anything that year, but I promised I would definitely not leave the house all day next Mother's Day. That may have been a good thing. At any rate, it was Monday. A wonderfully normal weekday on which nothing would occur. I ate a light breakfast and headed for school. I was not on my mountain bike. I was using the ladies' bike. As I thought about the fact that Senjougahara would finally be attending school again, my feet felt light as they pedaled. However, on a downslope not far from my house, I almost ran into a girl unsteadily walking along. I frantically braked.

The girl had bangs short enough to see her eyebrows and had pigtails.

She was wearing a large backpack.

"Oh, Araragi-san."

"You got the two ra's backwards."

"Sorry, I stuttered."

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, um, how to put this..."

The girl had the confused expression of a ninja that had failed a camouflage technique and then gave an embarrassed grin.

“Well, you see. Thanks to your help, Araragi-san, I moved up from being a ghost that haunts a specific area to being a wandering ghost. I got a special promotion up two levels.”

“Hehh...”

I was shocked.

That wonderfully absurd logic was so vague and arbitrary that an expert like Oshino (as frivolous and flippant as he could be) would probably faint if he heard it.

It may have meant nothing to her, but I was in a position where I had to constantly be thinking about my attendance rate, so I needed to get to school before I was late. As such, I said “see ya” and got back on my bike after we had exchanged only a few words.

And then she said one last thing.

“Um, Araragi-san. I am going to be wandering around this area for a while,” said that girl. “So call out to me if you see me.”

In the end, it was quite a wonderful story.

Translator's Notes

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1. ↑ Means "Bus Gas Explosion".
2. ↑ A Japanese game in which someone is asked to say a word repeatedly and is then asked a simple question that they will often get wrong due to a close-but-not-quite-right answer being very similar to the word repeated.
3. ↑ 渦
4. ↑ 牛
5. ↑ 蝸牛
6. ↑ 禍
7. ↑ Means "Without climax, without resolution, with profound meaning".
8. ↑ An author who wrote a book called "Sorekara" which is what Hanekawa kept saying.
9. ↑ The kanji of Mayoi mean True Dusk.
10. ↑ Najimu is Japanese for "to grow accustomed to".
11. ↑ Next = 次. Sheep = 羊. Jealous = 羨.
12. ↑ The correct version is Namamugi Namagome Namatamago which means "Raw Wheat, Raw Rice, Raw Egg".
13. ↑ "Hotto" can mean both "hot" or "relief".
14. ↑ This is the improved version of moe she came up with in part 002.

Edited by: Jahfury.